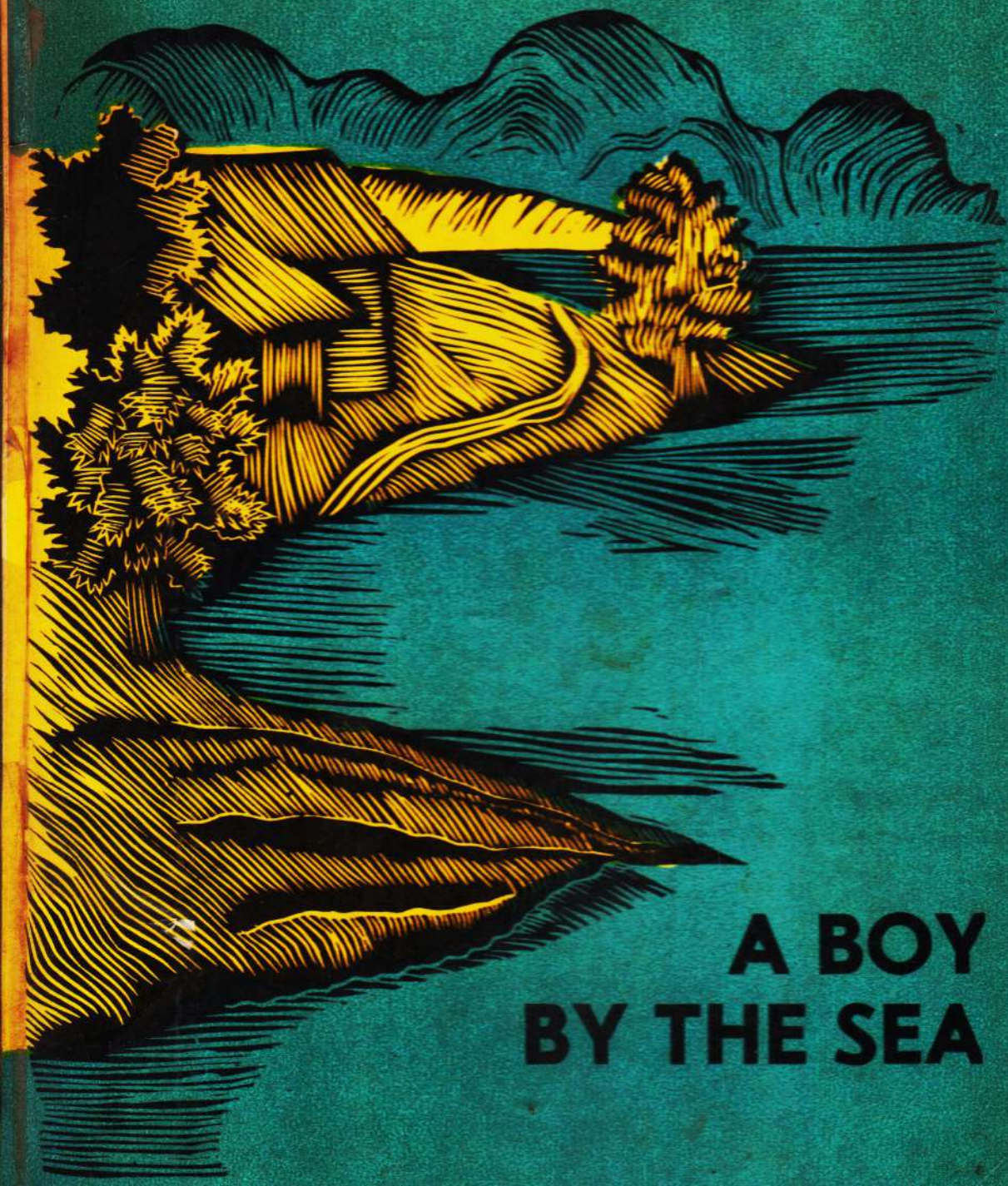


N. DUBOV



**A BOY
BY THE SEA**

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BY THE SEA



Progress Publishers

Moscow

Translated from the Russian
Designed by Alexander Burkatovsky

Н. ДУБОВ
МАЛЬЧИК У МОРЯ
(повести)
На английском языке

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A Word About the Author *

Nikolai Dubov is a well-known contemporary Soviet writer. Most of his books were written for and about children. In the twenty-odd years that he has been writing, Dubov's books have become very popular in the Soviet Union, a land of fifteen national republics, for they have been translated into many languages of the peoples of the USSR. They have also become popular abroad, where they have been widely translated, too. His novel *It Is Hard to Be Alone* won the State Prize of the USSR for 1970. The two stories in this book were both made into popular films.

The publishers of his books have received many letters from young readers, asking about the author. He knows so much about children and is never afraid to frighten them by depicting the harsh facts of life. This is a very important point. In every good book apart from the characters actually there is always another and perhaps the most important character created by the author who always remains behind the scenes. This is the author himself. One never has to guess about his views on life and people, for they are always clear. That is why this interest in the author is understandable. Some of the many questions sent in by readers are:

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why does the writer usually choose his characters from among the working class? Why does he write in such detail of the relationship between children and adults? Both Dubov's biography and his books provide the answers.

Nikolai Dubov was born in Siberia in 1910. His father was a worker at a locomotive repair factory. He started out in his father's footsteps, working at the same factory. Dubov showed a talent for writing at an early age. He began writing for the factory newspaper and later for a large city paper. He had much to write about, having gained some experience as a worker by then and coming to know very different kinds of people. In his quest to discover more about life and the people in this world he changed many jobs and travelled all over the country. He was a student of the Department of History at Leningrad University, a teacher, a librarian and the director of a factory community centre. He lived in Moscow Region, in Central Asia, in the Altai Territory and in the Ukraine. Starting out as a newspaperman, he later turned to playwriting. After the war Dubov's first plays were put on by several theatres. One was awarded a prize. That is why it was such a surprise to many when this acknowledged playwright at the age of forty suddenly turned to writing for and about children.

However, there was a reason for this dramatic change in his career. All the very different grown-ups among whom Dubov lived and worked, the kind and the mean, the warm-hearted and the indifferent, had once been happy children who had not yet done any good or any evil in their lives. What had made them grow up into people who were good or bad, happy or grumbling, warm-hearted or cold-hearted? When had each of them taken their first step, one that had gone unnoticed by their elders, which was later to make them the adults they were to become?

Nikolai Dubov was not the only one to ask himself this question. Every good writer has devoted his talent to revealing the way a person's conscience matures, to his understanding or lack of understanding of his responsibilities towards himself and others. Dubov began writing for and about children because he came to the realisation that childhood is the most important part of a person's

life. Nothing in it can be put off till later. One cannot overlook any action that is mean or dishonest, for it is during one's childhood that one learns the most important lessons in life.

The characters in Dubov's books are Soviet children. They live in a society in which each adult is judged by the good he does for others. This means how much fish he has caught if he is a fisherman, how much grain he has grown if he is a collective farmer, how well he has tended the forests if he is a forester and how well he has done his job, no matter how great or small it may be. In Nikolai Dubov's books the world of adults is not a world apart. As in real life, children and adults share the same world.

There are quite a few interesting books about small children being lost in a forest or a jungle and then being brought up by animals. These children learn the ways and the language of the beasts. Such is Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and such are the adventures of Tarzan. Science, however, has proven that these legends are completely unfounded. Small children brought up by wild animals can never later become human beings in the full sense of the word, people who can think as humans, and speak, and walk erectly.

Man is a social being, and all this will come to a child only through living side by side with adults. Only thus will he grow into a social being; only through his contact with adults does he either learn to be truthful and kind or untruthful and cruel. That is why the adults in Dubov's books are judged so severely.

In both of the stories in this book the importance of the example set by adults is shown most clearly.

Thus, in the story "Lights on the River", we see the gradual change that comes over Kostya, a rather selfish city boy who likes to boast and is annoyed whenever his elders tell him what to do. His outlook and sense of values change during his stay with his uncle, a buoy-keeper on the Dnieper who has had a very hard life but has never succumbed to the difficulties he has encountered.

The author protests strongly against the common belief that a child is not yet an individual but, rather, something half-made from which one will be shaped in time. Dubov firmly believes that

a child is an individual with a set of moral convictions that have already taken root and are developing further, with a character all his own and an outlook all his own. Moreover, he believes that a child is convinced that the world is a fascinating place and that life was meant to be happy.

Sashuk, the five-year old boy in "A Boy by the Sea" is a fisherman's son. He knows how hard his father and the other men must work to earn their living. The small, close-knit group is a model of the adult world for him. He must try to understand why some grown-ups are kind, why some others, who come from the city, consider him to be unworthy of themselves and their children. He is not crushed by these thoughts, however, for the adult world around him is made up of kind, just people, too, and they help him to preserve his faith in others and to judge them wisely.

A three-volume edition of Nikolai Dubov's works has now appeared in the Soviet Union. Included in this collection are a full-length novel, several novellas and short stories.

Dubov's stories are tales of joy and sadness, of events of greater and lesser importance. However, there is never anything that is insignificant, written simply to make the reader chuckle or drop a tear of pity on the page. Everything that concerns the characters of his stories is important to the story and to the reader. Here, as in real life, good and evil cannot live in harmony. Here, as in real life, one cannot become a person of true worth by simply adhering to the rules of good behaviour. One must hate all that is unkind, dishonest, untruthful and done for show, but one must not simply close one's eyes to these evils. One must stand up and fight against them, without stopping to think whether there will be any personal reward or not in the end.

The world is not handed to us on a silver platter. We must make it a place in which to live happily and we must do this ourselves, all of us, every day of our lives. The characters Nikolai Dubov has created with such understanding and love are all bound by a common desire to change life for the better, to do away with everything that interferes with all that is good and honest. Then and only then will they live a full life of their own choosing, putting their

shoulders to the wheel and receiving in exchange comradeship and the joy of communing with others and with nature.

This latter is of great importance, for a person who has not learned to see the beauty of his native land is cheated out of a lot. The author devotes much space in this book to the joy one experiences by being daily in contact with nature, even though this be only a deserted sandy beach.

However, it is not sufficient to merely admire the beauties of nature. In his many books Dubov speaks out against those who take all that nature can give and not only return nothing to it, but leave a wasteland behind them.

Dubov is a very restless writer, one who is equally demanding towards himself and towards others. This need for action is of great importance, for his concern about children and nature is a concern about the future of the world and of humanity.

Lev Razgon



LIGHTS ON THE RIVER

Kostya's Journey Begins

Kostya was being seen off by Mother and Lyolka.

That Mother should come, he could understand that, but why Lyolka? Mother had wanted to leave her at home, but she had raised such a howl that they had had to take her along. Of course, she wanted to look at the landing-stage and the steamer and cared nothing about seeing Kostya off. Well, he did not care to be seen off, least of all by kids like Lyolka. It would have been quite different if had it been the boys, especially his best friend Fyodor. But Fyodor was away; he had gone to Oster with his father the day before on their usual Saturday fishing trip. Many a time had Kostya asked to go with them, promising to bring back a pailful of fish, but Mother had never let him go. Fish could be bought in the market, she said. Kostya's only explanation for this was that she was afraid he would drown. But why should that happen? He was the strongest swimmer in Form 5.

Now, at Uncle Efim's no one was going to stop him fishing! The only trouble was he had not been allowed to bring his rods with him. Mother would not hear of it.

"Oh no, you're not!" she said. "I'm not having those sticks of yours in the trolleybus. I've walked my legs off as it is."

Sticks! Why, no one had better fishing rods than Kostya. Not even Fyodor. They were made of real bamboo, and he was almost ready to bet Uncle Efim did not have ones like that. And Mother had not walked her legs off at all. Kostya wished he could walk like that for he was hardly able to keep up with her and had to lengthen his stride not to lag behind.

"Kostya, stop putting your feet out like a stork! Can't you walk properly?"

Mother had been impossible these last few days—everything Kostya did seemed to be wrong and he found himself scolded at every turn. She said herself that this trip she had to go on had made her lose her head. Lyolka did not understand.

"But you haven't lost it, Mother. I can see it!" she said in surprise.

"You're still too little to understand," Kostya said with a laugh.

Kostya was big and he understood.

A trip to Kakhovka! That would make you lose your head even if you were not going for good but only on business for the office. To think that she would be seeing where the canal was to run and the place where the dam was going to be built, and the geologists boring holes of all kinds! But *that* did not worry Mother. She worried over little things like how to leave Lyolka and Kostya, who was going to look after the room, why Uncle Efim had not come and what was to be done now?

Kostya suggested the most sensible thing. He said they should all go together and that nothing would happen to the room while they were away. But this only annoyed Mother and she told him not to be silly. She was not going on an excursion, she said, but on business, and children weren't wanted there. If she felt she could depend on him she would have left him and Lyolka with Maria Afanasyevna and that would have settled everything. But

echoey concrete passage, across the sun-baked street and, finally, came out on the landing stage.

A deep hoarse hoot sounded beyond the wooden station building. Lyolka started and clutched at Kostya with both hands. Kostya began worrying: in his opinion they were walking much too slowly and would miss the boat.

They walked through the river-port building and went down the steps to the landing stage, which was a big barge with what looked like a house built on top. You could not see the steamer at all because of this house-thing, only a stubby black funnel with a red band round it and a mast with a string of lamps. The steamer was moored right alongside the barge. No water whatever showed between them; except for a thick beam that blocked the way you could have walked from the moorage to the steamer without even having to jump. There was a narrow gap for the gangway—two planks nailed together with railings at each side.

Two seamen stood near the gangway. Kostya knew they were not real seamen but rivermen, for seamen, of course, sailed the sea, not rivers; but these men looked like real seamen in their navy-blue jackets with brass buttons and white caps. Their caps had badges showing a gold anchor surrounded by gold leaves. The men talked and laughed in such a carefree manner that Kostya began to feel ashamed of being in such a hurry and deliberately slackened his pace to a waddle, which made Mother tug at his sleeve.

"Wake up, Kostya!" she said, and turning to the two men asked, "Where can I find the captain?"

"The captain isn't here just now," one of them replied, his eyes following something happening in the steamer's passage-way.

"Oh dear! What shall we do?" Mother exclaimed in dismay.

The second man glanced at Mother and his face brightened.

Kostya knew Mother was very pretty and he liked looking at her himself—naturally, not when she was angry and scolded him for something. But this young man with officer's shoulder-straps and fair hair like Fyodor's was looking and smiling much too long at her. Kostya did not like it at all and frowned.

"Can I help you?" asked the fair-haired officer.

"My brother wrote I should speak to the captain, and now he isn't here. What'll I do now? Perhaps he has an assistant?"

"The first mate's busy. I'm second mate. Perhaps I can do something for you?"

Mother explained in a jumbly way that she had to send her son to Polyanskaya Greblya; her brother was the buoy-keeper there and he would be there to meet him; she was afraid to send the little boy on his own, for Polyanskaya Greblya did not have even a landing stage, you know, but she could not help it as the office was sending her on urgent business and she wanted to ask the captain and now he was not there. . . .

The second mate understood everything at once but Mother went on and on and he did not interrupt her because her face was pleasant to look at and she had a lovely way of talking. Kostya saw this and knitted his brow into a sterner frown.

"I see," the second mate said at last. "But where's your son? This grumpy comrade here? Why, I took him to be your younger brother, he's so grown-up."

Kostya was not taken in by this raw flattery and went on scowling.

"You needn't worry, everything'll be perfectly all right. We'll deliver him safe and sound. Why, I know Efim Kondratyevich Kicheyev personally—I should say so, he's the best buoy-keeper on the river! Your son'll have an excellent trip, and on the way we'll make a real sailor out of him. Go on board if you like and fix the lad up—there's still plenty of time. I'll send the stewardess to you immediately."

Still sulking, Kostya walked up the gangway and Mother followed, holding Lyolka by the hand.

"Auntie Pasha!" the officer called. "Show the passenger to his cabin."

A tall bony woman with a long nose and thin compressed lips appeared from somewhere in the passage. She held her lips so tightly together that Kostya thought she spoke without opening her mouth.

Auntie Pasha walked a few steps along the passage, turned to the left and suddenly seemed to sink through the floor.

"Goodness, what a staircase!" Mother exclaimed in alarm.

"It's not a staircase, Mother, it's a companionway," Kostya said.

"You know everything, don't you? Quite the famous sailor. Take care you don't bump your head!"

When had he ever bumped his head? Kostya let them go down first and then ran down dashing, like a sailor. But the companionway was so steep, the steps were so close together, and the iron strips on them so slippery that he would have gone head-over-heels if he had not clutched at the handrail. Mother turned her head at the suspicious noise but Kostya had already regained his balance and was gravely taking the steps one by one.

"Here's your cabin," said Auntie Pasha without opening her lips. "Make yourself comfortable," she added and walked out.

The cabin was small. It had two bunks, a dresser near the door, and a tiny table between the bunks. One of them was not really a bunk, but a hard narrow cot on trestles with oilcloth upholstery. But there was a real porthole over the table right up near the ceiling—a little round window clamped to the vessel's side by brass wing-nuts. Kostya immediately climbed on the table and began unscrewing the nuts.

"Kostya, don't you dare! Do you hear? Now, either you promise you won't open that window or we'll go ashore this very minute and you shan't go anywhere!"

Kostya climbed down from the table thinking that anyway nothing but the tarred side of the barge could be seen for the time being and that he would see how the land lay once the steamer pulled out.

Lyolka wandered round the cabin touching the table, the bunk, and the cork life belts, while Mother went over everything again: Kostya should obey Uncle Efim, and should not go swimming without grown-ups—good heavens no! He should not gobble up the jam tarts immediately, like a baby, but first eat the cooked meat and a hard-boiled egg, after which he could have all the tarts he wanted; he was not to run about the steamer, go near the side

or look down at the water because that would make him sick—in short, she said everything that mothers say on such occasions, thus boring Kostya horribly.

He tried talking like Auntie Pasha, without opening his mouth, but this only alarmed Mother.

“Why are you mumbling? Have you got a toothache?” she asked.

This alarmed Kostya as he thought it might mean having to stay at home, and he began talking normally, like everybody else, not like Auntie Pasha.

There was really plenty of time and Kostya was tortured by that awkward feeling of having nothing to do when everybody had said good-bye, everything had been said and done and you had only to wait for the real parting. Mother was still saying something, looking fixedly at Kostya. An anxious, sorrowful look came into her large hazel eyes. Lyolka too hushed down and was puffing suspiciously—it meant she would burst out crying any minute. All this made Kostya so nervous that he was on the verge of tears himself, but at that moment a deep hoarse hoot again sounded on deck; Lyolka threw herself at Mother’s knees and Mother suddenly awoke to the fact that it was time to go. They went out into the narrow passage. Passengers were rushing up the gangway, pushed them with their bags and baskets, but Mother noticed nothing. She gave Kostya another anxious and sorrowful look, then kissed him hard several times, repeating hurriedly all the while: “Do be a clever boy, Kostya. And, please, stay out of mischief!”

Lyolka also stretched for a kiss. Kostya tried to push her away so that Mother would not notice, but she did: “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Kostya! Ugh, what a rude boy you are! Kiss your sister!”

But Kostya was not rude at all. He just could not bear sloppiness of any kind. However, there was nothing he could do now, and he bent down and offered his cheek submissively. He knew it! Lyolka had wheedled some ice-cream out of Mother as soon as they stepped out of the house and now her face and hands were all sticky. Who had invented this kissing business, he’d like to know!

Mother and Lyolka crossed to the landing stage and stood near the barrier.

Kostya wanted to come closer, but was moved on.

"You can't stand here, boy, we're pushing off!" he was told gruffly.

Earlier Kostya had spotted a companionway leading up into a hatch through which the blue sky peeped in. Now he climbed it and found himself on the upper deck.

In the middle of the deck, in front of the tall black funnel, there was a glazed deck-house with the helm showing in it. On either side, along the edges of the deck, there were smaller deck-houses with polished brass tubes shining in them. Kostya guessed they were speaking-tubes. That meant he was on the captain's bridge. Would he be turned off? No, it did not look like it. There were wooden benches on the bow and stern, as in the park, and even little tables, as though this were not a deck but a place where you could have food served. There were passengers sitting on the benches and no one was chasing them away. Therefore, Kostya reasoned, this must be a steamer with a combined captain's bridge and promenade deck.

Railings made of two rows of iron rods ran all round the deck. Kostya walked over to the railings, put his hands on them, and planted his feet wide apart like a sailor. Oh, if only the fellows of Form 5, or at least his best friend Fyodor, could see him standing there on the captain's bridge! Well, not exactly on the bridge—on the deck, but there was the bridge, after all, right next to him. . . .

But the boys of Form 5 were not there to see him and neither was Fyodor.

There was Mother standing below on the landing stage and anxiously looking for Kostya. Lyolka saw him first and shouted, "There he is! There he is!"

Mother also caught sight of him, smiled and was about to call something when the bell went. Kostya was splashed all over with little drops of water as close behind him the siren blew three deafening blasts. The people on the landing stage were shouting

something, but nothing could be heard above the hooting and they looked like fish opening and shutting their mouths soundlessly.

"Cast off the bow!"

This command was given by the fair-haired second mate. He was standing in the port deck-house and saying something into the bellmouth of the shining brass tube which he then closed with a stopper attached to a thin chain.

The deck and the iron railings began vibrating slightly. The mooring-line was being unwound from the iron mooring-blocks on the lower deck, right under Kostya; it sagged and its other end, finishing in a loop, was taken off the mooring-block on the landing-stage and thrown into the river. The narrow strip of water between the ship and the pier began to widen. Too bad! There was so much to be seen and he had to miss it because Mother was standing near the barrier and kept her eyes fixed on him, making it quite impossible to go away. Kostya did not wish to hurt her feelings. There she was smiling with the tears running down her cheeks and she kept brushing them away with the tips of her fingers.

He did not see that there was anything to cry about. He was not going on a year's voyage round the world, was he? Yet something throbbed inside Kostya. After all they had never separated before. Once Kostya had travelled in the train but even then he had gone with Mother and had been so small that he had almost forgotten that journey. So as not to give way to this sudden sadness Kostya puckered his brow fiercely, tightened his grip on the railings, and paid no attention to Lyolka who was waving her hand. She started waving as soon as she saw him on the deck and from then on had never stopped, but Kostya did not respond; she stamped her feet and cried in a vexed voice, "Kostya! Here I am, Kostya!"

Mother raised her hand too, and waved a handkerchief.

The steamer nosed away from the landing stage, which seemed to move backwards on the port side, and the people there grew smaller, and now it looked as though it were not Mother and Lyolka standing there but two girls—a big girl and the other, quite a little one. Kostya waved back at them as long as he could distin-

guish their figures and then dropped his arm. They would now probably climb the hill and look a long time at the steamer carrying him away.

On Board the *Ashkhabad*

The steamer turned its bow downstream and, blowing its siren again, sailed past Vladimir Hill, the bathing-beach ferry and Trukhanov Island. Plywood sun-shelters and kiosks dotted the island like mushrooms right down to the water's edge, while the real vegetation retreated farther up the bank, exposing the shore to the sun's merciless heat.

A motor boat, raising grey whiskers of spray, raced in the opposite direction. Kostya enviously followed the people in it until he lost sight of them and then started exploring the steamer.

There were canvas-covered lifeboats on the port and starboard edges of the deck, in front of the glass deck-houses, and the bow of each lifeboat bore the name *Ashkhabad*. For some reason the letter "d" was blurred on one of the lifeboats, making the name simply *Ashkhaba*. Empty white buckets stood in a row near the walls of the deck-houses. Every bucket had only one blue letter painted on it, and together they spelled the name of the steamer—*Ashkhabad*. The life belts tied to the railings, and the wheel casings also had this word on them. The deck was all it ought to be—wooden, made of long narrow planks with the grooves between them caulked and filled with tar.

Kostya started counting the number of planks laid across the deck, but the mast suddenly began bending until it lay almost flat: the *Ashkhabad* was coming to a bridge and the mast was being lowered so as not to hit it.

The steamer's siren blew a deep, impressive blast, and Kostya saw what the siren was—a brass pipe with two semi-circular holes. It was fastened to the back of the funnel. At first it let off drops of water and steam and the bass hooting started after that.

The *Ashkhabad* came close to the left bank as she passed between the piers of the bridge. Kostya wanted to see the automo-

biles and buses moving across the bridge, but no matter how he craned his neck all he saw were a lot of interlacing beams and girders. The highest point of the pier had lamps hanging one above the other and there was a line of clamps rising to them vertically from the water like steps. Kostya estimated if it were possible to climb to the top. Fyodor, of course, could do it, and although it was a long way up and frightening, he was sure he too could reach the top. Nothing special, he thought.

The overgrown slopes of the right bank, the belfry of the monastery rising high into the sky, and the railway bridge were all left behind. The banks, now wrapped in a green blanket of willow-bushes, seemed to crouch as they receded. The few passengers on deck had their backs to the wind, or were settled down on the poop-deck behind the funnel where warm air smelling of hot oil streamed from the engine-room hatches.

A look into the hatch showed valves, pipes swathed in thick brown windings like compresses, and shining levers that moved back and forth like elbows. A striped jersey was drying on one of the pipes and a pair of black trousers on another.

Kostya went down to take a closer look at the engine. The deck here was made of iron and was full of burrs to keep your feet from skidding. But people's boots had given the iron such a high polish that the burrs were of little help and the deck was slippery just the same. Kostya found the companionway leading to the engine-room, but as soon as he put his foot across the high iron threshold, a voice called out to him:

"Where d'you think you're going? You can't go in there!"

Kostya turned away and went aft to the saloon. There were not many passengers there and those there were sat apart from each other in silence. But three women, surrounded with baskets and with sacks squeezed between their legs, were bent closely together nodding their heads like clock-work, while a fourth was telling them something in an excited undertone. Kostya pretended to be just passing by. Perhaps it was something worth listening to!

"I come in—and what do you think, my dears?" the story-teller was saying tragically. "The heifer hadn't been watered!"

That had been enough for Kostya. He wasn't interested in heifers.

Sitting some distance away near a window was a woman with a tired face, and there were bundles, bags, and wooden suitcases with big padlocks piled around her and under the seat. Every now and then the woman, worn down by the heat and fatigue, let her head fall on a big bundle against which a girl of about fourteen was curled up asleep. A smaller girl with little fair curls on her forehead roamed about the saloon for a time, then climbed on a seat and, standing on it, watched the gently sloping green banks glide by. She seemed to be drowsy too, for she kept giving enormous yawns.

"You'll swallow a fly, if you don't look out!" said Kostya climbing in the seat beside her. "Been missing your sleep?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. We've been travelling and travelling and I simply don't get chance to sleep enough."

"But we've only just left."

"Oh, we've come much farther. From Sakhalin. We've been travelling three weeks."

"From Sakhalin?" Kostya repeated, eyeing the girl with a mixed feeling of curiosity and mistrust.

It was only because he was bored that he had started talking to her. Usually a fellow of Form 5 would turn down the idea of talking to a girl. But now she seemed quite extraordinary to him and even the little bleached flowers on her much-laundered dress had something special about them.

"You must be fibbing."

"Why should I?" the girl replied nonchalantly. "You can ask Mummy if you like."

Kostya glanced at the woman with the tired face, but her head had now settled on the bundle and she was sound asleep.

"What were you doing there?"

"What do you think? We lived there. Daddy worked at the fish-cannery and we lived in the settlement nearby."

"And you actually saw the Pacific Ocean?"

"Of course I did. We lived on the coast, you know."

"And you went to sea in a ship?"

"Of course! You can't reach Sakhalin any other way. Oh, I forgot, you can go by plane, but we've too much luggage."

The girl spoke calmly. There wasn't even a note of excitement in her voice. Kostya burned with envy and wild curiosity. He could not understand how she could talk indifferently about things like that.

How different it would have been if it were he who had lived on Sakhalin, on the shore of an ocean! He wanted to know immediately everything she could tell him, but the little girl went on answering his questions in a flat and toneless voice.

"Oh you!" Kostya reproached her. "Why are you so dull? You've seen so much and can't tell about it!"

"That's because I'm sleepy. You'll see, when we arrive and I've had a good sleep, then—"

"Where are you going?"

"We're going to Granny's first, to Cherkassy, and later to Kakhovka."

"To Kakhovka?" Kostya's curiosity and envy mounted. "What for?"

"Father wants to get a job at the construction site."

"What about you?"

"Me? What do you think? I'll go to school. Father wanted to leave earlier. Then he decided to wait till Sonya and I finished our school term. We left as soon as the holidays began."

"Where's your father now?"

"In the bar. He went there a long time ago. Probably having a beer."

"Let's go there, and you show him to me."

"What if they won't let us in?"

"Don't worry, they will!"

They crossed the hollow-sounding iron deck to the bow accommodation where the bar was located. Around a square table facing the counter sat three men: a stout bald man in glasses, a swarthy youth, and a spare-built man with a tanned face that looked as if it had been through the fire; his cotton sweater was

tucked into his trousers. There were mugs of beer capped by bubbling snow-white foam in front of them.

"Hullo, come to fetch me, did you? Miss me?" the man in the sweater remarked to the girl. "Be with you in a jiffy!"

He plunged his light moustache into the foam, put the mug down, wiped his moustache—which was the same colour as the beer—and turned to his companions.

"I come from these parts, you see. From Alyoshki. How could I stop out there with a big thing like this starting where I come from? We're going to make a new land out of it, I can tell you!" He pounded the table with his fist so hard that the mugs danced, finished off the rest of his beer in one gulp, and stood up. Only then could you see how big and strong he was. "Come on, Nastya!"

Father and daughter went out. The youth drank up his beer and the stout man, mopping the bald spot on his head, followed the man going out with his eyes and said, "How do you like that?—Comes tearing across twelve thousand versts."

"It's only what you'd expect!" the young man replied. "Take me, for instance. I'll go there too as soon as I finish my training."

They fell silent.

Kostya waited for the conversation to continue, but the stout man went away and the youth buried himself in a book.

Some time later Kostya returned to the saloon where the family from Sakhalin had settled down. But Nastya was already fast asleep with her head in her mother's lap, and her father was also sleeping, his great length stretched out on the narrow seat.

Only Nastya's elder sister was awake. Kostya tried to start a conversation with her, but she blinked her sleep-swollen eyelids at him cautiously and pulled a wry face. Really it wasn't fair, Kostya thought: a sleepy dolt like that being taken to Kakhovka, and not he!

There was nothing now to keep Kostya in the saloon and he went to the bar again. The big windows there opened out to the front and sides, giving a view of everything that could be seen, while the door led to the bow where the anchor chain was wound

round a drum and some levers were sticking out. Kostya opened the door and was about to step out when he was halted by a shout: "Hey, boy, you can't go there. Can't you see what's written on the door?"

He had not meant to do anything; he had only wanted to look at the anchor and watch the waves running away from the prow. Well, he thought, if all this was out of bounds here he might as well stay in his cabin.

At the companionway someone put a hand on his shoulder.

"How do you like our ship?"

The second mate, whom Kostya had already met, was standing in front of him and smiling. Kostya was sore over his bad luck and the officer's smile only teased his anger. After hesitating for a moment, he growled crossly:

"I don't!"

"Really? Why not?"

"How can you like it when you can't go anywhere or look at anything?"

"I see. You'd like to run the engine, turn the helm a bit and think it'd be fun to shout 'Hard to port!' or something like that into the megaphone. Right?"

"Nothing of the sort! I simply wanted to take a look."

"All right. Come along, let's go and look. You don't want to sit around here in the heat! Here," the second mate said, "next to the engine, the rudder's the most important thing on a steamer. It's there down below under the stern and the rudder chain leads to it from this helm. The helmsman turns the helm and the rudder turns too. . . ."

"A new hand, Comrade Second Mate?" asked the helmsman with a smile.

"You never know. These young fellows grow so fast."

"I don't mind. There is nothing wrong there."

"But where's the binnacle?" Kostya asked.

The helm was close to the window with no compass in front of it; in all the ships Kostya had read about there was always a compass on board.

"Hear that? He knows something, this comrade does!" the second mate laughed. "Well, we don't need a compass. We're not at sea, you know—we're on the Dnieper and here the banks and all the navigation signs are in sight."

"What about charts?"

"My chart's here," said the helmsman, tapping his forehead.

Kostya looked puzzled and the second mate explained:

"We have to know the river by heart—up and down and down and up, across and lengthwise."

"If you start looking at a chart, you'll be in the bank before you know where you are," the helmsman said. "Don't worry, we shan't lose our way without a chart."

"Bring the helm to!" the second mate broke in, but the helmsman was already turning the helm and easing the swerve the vessel was making. "I don't like the looks of that shoal: it's showing earlier than usual."

"I don't think so. It's about normal. The water's falling fast and that's why it's pushing up," the helmsman said.

"What else do you want to see? The speaking tube? We use it to pass orders to the engine-room, to tell them what speed to keep."

"May I—" Kostya began.

"No, you can't fool around with that."

"I only wanted to listen."

"All right, there's no harm in that."

The second mate pulled out the stopper and Kostya pressed his ear to the bell-mouth. A vague, indefinite sound and a rapid panting noise like someone breathing into his ear reached Kostya through the tube.

"Why aren't there any towns or villages? We've been sailing a long time and I haven't seen anything."

"There are towns, but they're far between—where the banks are high. See how low the banks are? The Dnieper floods them in the spring during high water. The water spreads for miles. If there were villages here they would also be flooded. The villages lie

farther up, on high ground, where the water can't reach them. That's why the banks seem deserted."

The second mate walked right round the deck with Kostya, showing him the side lights—green on starboard and red on port-side—and the cowls of the ventilators which were so wide that Kostya could easily climb into them. Painted white on the outside and red on the inside they looked like huge gaping mouths.

"Why is the floor below made of iron?"

"That's a leftover from the old days. Our steamer used to be a tug, then it was converted into a passenger vessel—fitted with a superstructure, cabins and the rest. But the deck stayed as it was."

Somebody hailed the second mate.

"Just a minute," he called back. "Listen, my lad, what's your name? Kostya? Run along and amuse yourself, Kostya, I'm wanted. But don't go near the side! I promised your mother that, so I'm responsible. See?"

"Aye, aye, sir. I shan't go near the side," Kostya said smartly.

"Oho! Quite the sailor! You'll make good, I can see that," the second mate laughed, running down the companionway.

This second mate had turned out to be a good sort, a decent fellow. He was always smiling. There was nothing wrong with that. It was just that he was young, merry, and liked everybody.

Kostya stood a long time watching the foaming water run back from the side of the vessel; he fancied he caught glimpses of fantastic pictures, one more fascinating than the other, flashing by in the curious whirlpools. When he raised his head he saw rosy smoke wreathing far away near the horizon, like clouds at sunrise.

The clouds grew, rose higher and slowly turned yellow. Shadows appeared on them, they began to turn green and soon Kostya realised that this was not smoke or clouds but a high steep bank with patches of grass growing on it. At first it looked as if the steamer were moving away from it, then the river made a sharp bend to the right and the steep slopes grew rapidly, screening half the sky. To the right a few solitary cottages stood on the slopes like steps, and a moored barge, serving as a landing-stage, nestled against the bank at the foot of a sheer hillside. The steamer drew

up beside the barge, where a number of girls were crowding against the railings, and the figure of a teacher or a Young Pioneer leader, who kept turning her head every minute like a brood-hen, towered above them.

"What's this place called?" Kostya asked an old man sitting on the deck.

"Tripolye."

"The famous one?"

"What do you mean the famous one? There's only one Tripolye."

Kostya bounced down the companion ladder to the gangway. It was in position and the schoolgirls were hurriedly picking their way along it in single file, while the teacher stood near the railings, moving her lips as she counted them with her hand raised.

"Kostya, take them up on deck!" his friend the second mate called out to him.

"No, no, to the cabin!" the teacher cried.

"If it's the cabin you want, it's all right with me!" the second mate agreed. "Take them to the stern saloon."

Kostya wanted to go ashore, but could not refuse the second mate. He marched to the stern saloon and the girls, whispering among themselves, followed him in a little band. The teacher appeared close on their heels and the girls surrounded her, gazing round at the saloon, chattering and raising such a hubbub that Kostya got away as soon as he could.

All the same it was too late to go ashore. The bell was already clanging, the siren hooting and the steamer drawing away from the landing-stage. The steam escaping from under the wheel casing whistled and hissed and covered the landing-stage in a dense cloud; it looked as though the steamer were drawing deep breaths as it mustered its strength for the journey.

Kostya climbed to the upper deck and gazed eagerly at the steep banks. The hillsides were bare and deserted. A white goat was wandering on a hillock where scanty tufts of grass jutted out of the clayey soil. It nibbled the grass, raised its head and looked at the ship while it chewed, then bent down and started nibbling again.

Tripolye! The place where the Kiev Komsomol youth perished and won immortal fame! It was only recently, just before the close of the school year, that the Young Pioneer leader had told them about the Tripolye tragedy of 1919, when a Komsomol column marched out of Kiev to do battle with a kulak gang of "Greens", how they came to Tripolye and died there in an unequal combat. Perhaps it was from this very hillside that Lyuba Aronova and Misha Ratmansky had looked their last at the Dnieper and at the endless expanse of the Dnieper basin, sending their farewell greeting to their Motherland. . . .

Kostya looked hard for a monument, but there was nothing on the bank resembling one.

He was sorry there wasn't a big beautiful monument, one that would be seen from afar so that on sighting it steamers would sound their sirens in long mournful hoots and the passengers, standing on deck in reverent silence, would look at it and think gratefully of the people who had sacrificed their lives for the beloved Soviet power, for communism. . . .

But there was no monument to be seen and the steamer did not hoot, but busily splashed its paddles in the water, while the old man who told Kostya it was Tripolye sat on a bench intent on skinning a smoked fish.

Kostya stood at attention, raised his hand in the Young Pioneer salute, and gazed hard and long at the Tripolye hillside disappearing in the distance.

The sun was dropping and the wind blowing harder; Kostya went down to his cabin to fetch his jacket. On the way back he looked into the saloon. Some of the girls were already sleeping with their heads resting on bundles and the others were listening to the teacher. Two girls left the saloon and looked about the passage as they stood near the door. The taller one, who was apparently bolder, asked Kostya, "Are we allowed to go up?"

"Yes," Kostya said. "Let's go, I'll lead the way."

He dashed up the companionway without touching the handrail and the girls lumbered up after him on their spindly legs, their heavy boots clattering.

"What form are you in?" he asked when they reached the deck.

"I've passed to Form 5," the taller girl replied.

"And I'm in Form 4," said the smaller girl.

"O-oh! . . ." Kostya dragged out in a superior tone. "Where are you going?"

The girls felt cold. They shivered in the wind, turned their backs to it, held down their billowing frocks with their hands, but did not go away; they vied with each other in telling Kostya that they were going to Kanev to visit the graves of Taras Shevchenko, the poet, and Arkadi Gaidar, the writer, that Olga Semyonovna was very nice, only she was always afraid someone would get lost or fall overboard and did not let them go anywhere, that this was their first trip on a steamer and everything was so interesting.

"If this is your first time on a steamer, then, of course," Kostya said condescendingly. "Here look . . ." and he began showing and telling them what he had heard from the second mate an hour before, only he spoke as though he had been born and bred amid all these deck-houses, rudder chains and companionways.

The girls turned blue and got goose-flesh from the cold, but they looked at Kostya with such wonder and admiration, that he was fired to greater effort and started telling them that he considered river steamers not even worth talking about: they sailed between banks and that was like taking a walk in a room, he said. Very dull! But the sea—that was the real thing. There you had to sail by compass and take your bearings by the sun! And then, Kostya pointed out, storms never broke out on rivers; it was as safe as a bathtub. But when a storm broke out at sea, well, you had to keep your wits about you. . . .

The enchanted listeners now regarded Kostya with such respect that they became quite deferent.

"You're a sailor yourself, I suppose. Home on leave?" the older girl asked.

"Well . . . not yet," Kostya said somewhat confusedly. "But I'll soon be one. I'm on my way to my Uncle's. He's a real . . . sailor," he added to his own surprise.

At that moment the teacher, angry and frightened, ran up to them and grasped Kostya's listeners by the arms. The girls were quite blue with cold by this time.

"What's this, girls? How dare you leave without permission? Just look what's become of you. As for you, my lad, you should be ashamed of yourself! You're older and should know better."

"But I didn't ask them, they came themselves," Kostya muttered in embarrassment.

The teacher paid no attention to him and led away her charges who, though terribly cold, were delighted with their new acquaintance.

The Cottage on the Bank

Kostya felt lonely on deck after the girls had gone, and he was cold, too. He couldn't very well go to the saloon after what had happened, and in any case girls were no fun. The fair-haired second mate was not anywhere about either, and seeing there was nothing else to do Kostya went down to his cabin. All this time something was bothering him, but he could not make out what it was and decided it was simply that he was hungry. He got out the cold meat, hard-boiled eggs and strawberry tarts, and paused to consider the situation. But he did not hesitate long. Did it make any difference what he ate first and what last? Why should he eat the meat first? He could begin with the tarts and follow up with the rest. His mind made up, Kostya ate all the tarts, then cut a slice of meat but somehow he was not hungry any more. So he packed everything back into the basket.

He climbed on the table and looked out of the porthole. The sun was setting, the clayey ledges and sand-bars along the left bank were turning pink, while the water was growing darker and seemed to be getting thicker and heavier.

Although he was not hungry any more that uncomfortable feeling was still there. He wondered if he had done anything he

should not have. He had not asked the girls to leave the saloon, had he? They had come of their own free will. He made up anything about the sea? No, what he had said was all true. He had it now—he had fibbed about Uncle Efim! Kostya did not know why he fibbed. Uncle Efim was not a sailor any more, he was a buoy-keeper. . . .

He had seen Uncle Efim only twice. Uncle Efim had visited them oftener than that, but each time Kostya had been away either in a Young Pioneer summer camp or at school, with the result that they had hardly met. Kostya remembered Uncle Efim's booming voice filling the whole room, his heavy steps making the wine-glasses in the sideboard tinkle faintly, his shaggy moustache, his quizzically twinkling eyes under equally shaggy brows, and his pungent home-grown tobacco.

When Uncle Efim lighted his pipe, Mother would put her hands to her throat and ask with horror, "Good gracious, how *can* you smoke that poison?"

"What, a bit strong for you, is it?" Uncle Efim would chuckle. "Just the thing for mosquitoes."

"But we're not mosquitoes!" Mother would say and throw the windows wide open.

The heavy, pungent smell of Uncle Efim's tobacco hung about the room for days after he had left.

Kostya was delighted when he learned Uncle Efim was a buoy-keeper—he was in Form 4 then—and questioned him all about it; he thought a buoy-keeper was something like the lighthouse-keepers on the desert islands he had read about in Jules Verne's *The Lighthouse at the End of the World*. But Uncle laughed and said that was different. A lighthouse was a lighthouse, and a buoy was a buoy, he said, a triangular thing on a raft with a lantern on it which had to be lighted in the evening and put out in the morning.

That was all. There were islands, too, and every one was a desert island, he said, adding that they were uninhabited because the river flooded them every spring, while nothing save osier-bush and grass grew in the sandy soil.

Thinking all this over now, Kostya did not expect to find anything interesting there. There'd be nothing to do except swimming and fishing every day. He thought it would be lonely, too, because there would be no one to go swimming and fishing with. Uncle Efim had no sons, only a daughter, Nyura.

Of course it would be horribly dull. So dull that Kostya's eyes closed without his knowing it and he dropped off to sleep.

"Hey! Wake up! We've arrived!"

Someone was shaking Kostya by the shoulder. He jumped up, blinked in the bright light coming from the lamp in the ceiling and saw the fair-haired second mate in front of him.

"It's still night, isn't it?" Kostya asked.

"Never mind. You'll finish your sleep at home. We're near Polyanskaya."

Kostya picked up his suitcase and basket and followed the second mate to the lower deck. There was nobody there, and the only sounds were the quick panting of the engine and the paddles splashing the water. The steamer moved in a black silence, the banks were hidden by the darkness and Kostya could not see even the water except where the green sidelight cast an uncertain reflection.

"I wonder where he's taking me?" Kostya thought in bewilderment.

The steamer gave two blasts on its siren, a long one, then a short one.

"No need for that," the second mate said. "Efim Kondratyevich's already on his way."

"Where? Where?" asked Kostya peering into the darkness.

"There, ahead, don't you see?"

A tiny yellow light showed faintly on the starboard bow. It disappeared, then came again, moving slowly towards the *Ashkhabad*. The steamer shut off its engines and lost speed. The light that had seemed so far away suddenly appeared quite close, seeming to split in two and Kostya made out a lantern on the bow of a boat, its snaky reflection gliding on the water, and behind the lantern a big dark figure of a man rowing steadily.

The boat came alongside the steamer and when the man in it stood up, his head on a level with the deck, Kostya recognised Uncle Efim even though the dim light made his moustache seem to cover half his face and his eyes looked like big dark hollows.

"Hello, Uncle! It's me, Kostya!" he cried out. "Only how can I get down?"

"Like this," the second mate said.

He lifted Kostya by his armpits and lowered him overboard where he was caught by Uncle Efim and placed on a rocking thwart.

"How's everything?"

"Fine. Thanks," Uncle Efim replied.

"It's been a pleasure. Good-bye, Efim Kondratyevich," the second mate said.

"Hold on tighter!" Uncle Efim told Kostya and shoved off hard from the steamer.

The boat sped away into the black void. The *Ashkhabad* gave a short, faint blast as though afraid of disturbing the night, and its paddle-wheels, turning slowly at first, gradually went round faster and faster. The steamer passed the boat. Its outlines melted into the darkness, only the lights in the stern portholes showing feebly, but soon even these faded and all that was left were little waves that rocked the boat gently.

"Well, how are things at home? How's Mother?" Uncle Efim asked, putting out the lantern and taking up the oars.

"Everything's all right. Mother's going on a trip for the office."

Uncle Efim asked other questions, but Kostya mumbled vague replies.

"You look like you want to sleep. Eh?"

"Who, me?" Kostya protested weakly.

He was drowsy all the same. The early morning chill pierced even his jacket. As for his light summer trousers, they were no help at all. The chill was especially hard on Kostya's knees, and no amount of squeezing and rubbing helped.

Though he was sleepy and cold, Kostya could not help wondering how Uncle Efim managed to find his way about without a com-

pass and knew where to row in the darkness. Uncle Efim rowed with powerful strokes, without even turning round. Every time the oars were pulled out Kostya heard the hurried, gentle rippling of the water against the boat's sides.

The darkness in front thickened, grew, and advanced upon them.

"Hold on!" Uncle Efim warned again.

Kostya gripped the sides, but that did not save him from jolting forward and he just missed hitting his chin against his knees when the boat struck the bank and came to a sudden, abrupt standstill.

"We're there! Bring your things."

Kostya climbed out of the boat, Uncle Efim pulled it almost half-way out of the water and they walked up a steep path to a little cottage. It was dark and still there.

Uncle Efim lit a lantern and showed Kostya his bed. The boy pulled off his clothes somehow, threw back the blanket and fell asleep so quickly that he did not hear Uncle Efim tucking him in with gruff affection, picking up the lantern and walking out.

Kostya was awakened by a high, shrill noise. The sunlight streaming in through a wide-open window fell on the drying, freshly-scrubbed floor. The distant cloudless sky showed through the open door. The strange noise continued, mixed now with a sort of sighing and sobbing. He looked round and saw a girl standing beside the table with her back to him. Her light reddish hair was braided in two pigtails tied with a red ribbon. "Freckled," Kostya decided to himself. "Red-heads always are."

The girl's shoulders rose and fell; that high, shrill noise was coming from her.

"What you blubbing for?" Kostya asked, raising himself on his elbows.

The girl turned round quickly. There was not a single freckle on her face. She had small white teeth and clear blue eyes.

"I'm not blubbing. I'm singing. I'm kneading dough and singing to keep myself company. Does it sound like I'm blubbing? Really? How long have you been awake?"

She rattled her words off so quickly that Kostya had no chance to answer, and she did not seem to expect him to do so.

"I know, you're my cousin. Daddy's sister's your mother. That's right, isn't it? You're Kostya Golovanov. Only why Golovanov?*" Perhaps it's because you've got a big head? Is it? No, your head's quite ordinary. Then it's simply a name like any other. We've a girl in Form 5 called Zdravstvuy.** Galya Zdravstvuy. Every time the girls greet each other she thinks she's being called and that makes a muddle of everything. Funny, don't you think so?"

At first Kostya felt like ticking her off, then he wanted to laugh, but he did not have time to do either.

"My name's Nyura. You're going to stay with us, aren't you? I'll show you everything. It's nice here, you'll see. Why don't you say something? You're not dumb, are you?"

"How can I say anything when you never stop talking," Kostya retorted.

"Oh, I know! I talk so fast I can never stop. When the teacher calls me to the blackboard and I start saying the lesson, she listens and listens and then says, 'Kicheyeva, you're not talking, you're running downhill.' Is she right, d'you think? It's a terrible failing, I dare say! Our maths teacher, Victor Petrovich, says it's surplus energy and calls me the Rocket. The boys call me that too. I mean they don't call me that really, but just to tease me, but I don't care, let them! What would you do? Why are you laughing? D'you think it's a good name for me? I don't think it's a bit nice. What's your failing? Daddy says everybody's got failing. I think so too. Don't you?"

She continued kneading the dough as she chattered on. Her hands worked as fast as her tongue, and the dough sighed plaintively and cheeped under her little fists.

"Well, that's all. I'll cover it—you see—and it'll rise. You know how to light an oven? You don't? How's that? I'll light it

* Golovanov—from the Russian word *golova* meaning head.—*Tr.*

** Zdravstvuy—"hello" or "good day."—*Tr.*

in a moment, and we'll go for a swim. You like to swim in the morning, don't you?"

"But isn't the water very cold?"

"Phew! It's best of all in the morning!"

As she spoke Nyura flew about the room like a little red flame. And the things she touched moved and assumed their proper places just as quickly. A white cloth covered the dough, the oven-door clattered open and hit the wall, the kindling crackled as it caught alight, the flame greedily spreading to the logs.

"Let's go, quick, the fire won't burn all day!"

Kostya followed Nyura out of the cottage, but had to run to keep up with her. Before he had left the porch she had already reached the edge of the bluff and disappeared over it with a flash of her pigtailed. Kostya sped after her but missing the path slid down the clayey slope on his heels. On the narrow strip of sandy beach below there was a small boat turned upside down and another, bigger boat floating in the river nearby. Nyura was already sitting in the bigger boat and calling to Kostya, but he stopped, stunned by the beauty of the morning.

There was not a ripple on the river; the water was as clear and smooth as glass. The light mist had lifted from the surface and if you squatted and looked through the space between the water and the mist you could see the golden sand-bank and green grass of what seemed to be either an island or the opposite bank. The sun had just peeped over the horizon and was unhurriedly rising in the deep, blue sky.

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up!" the girl called. She had thrown off her frock and was standing in shorts and singlet. "Can you dive?"

She jumped and dropped into the mirror-like water like a ball, raising a fountain of splashes, and almost immediately her red hair appeared on the surface.

"Oh, it's lovely! What are you waiting for?" she cried.

Kostya wanted to test whether the water was cold, as he always did, but was afraid this red-headed chatterbox would think him a coward. He climbed the boat's stern which he thought rather

low for a dive, but there was no help for it. He placed his hands together, took off like a spring and, making a semi-circle, smoothly cut into the water almost vertically. When he swam up to the boat, blowing the water out of his mouth, Nyura was sitting on the stern and looking at him admiringly.

"Oh, that was fine! I can't dive like that. You'll teach me, won't you? Well, here goes once more—and then I'll have to run and get the breakfast ready as there's Daddy'll be home soon."

She dived again, then quickly pulled on her frock and ran away. Kostya scanned the river for a long time and finally caught sight of a small dark speck far downstream. At first it seemed to be standing still, then slowly grew bigger and flashes of light came from its sides—these were the wet oars glistening in the sunlight.

When Kostya reached the cottage again Nyura was already putting on the table a big plate of fried pancakes with melted butter bubbling and sizzling on them. Three mugs and a moist earthenware jug of milk clattered and clanged as Nyura brought them out.

"Well, how are you two getting on here? Made friends?" Uncle Efim asked as he came in.

"We got along quite well, Daddy!" Nyura said. "Isn't that right, Kostya? I should say so! Why shouldn't we get along? Come on, I'll pour the water for you to wash."

Uncle Efim washed unhurriedly—here, there and everywhere, as he liked to say—and then they all sat down and ate the light, crisp pancakes and drank the creamy milk that was so cold it made the teeth ache.

"Thank you, my little woman," Uncle Efim said, getting up.

He lit his pipe and the whole room at once filled with a smell as acrid as ammonia.

"Oh, Daddy! How many times have you been told!" Nyura cried, waving her hands and trying to push out the window as far as it would go though it was already wide open.

"Come on out into the fresh air, Kostya; 'cepting me and the mosquitoes, nobody can stand this fumigator o' mine," Uncle Efim said smiling.

"Well, this is where we live," Uncle Efim said, sweeping his hand in a wide arc, when they reached the bank. "Like it?"

"Yes. It's fine."

Kostya really did like the wide expanse of water-meadows on the left bank, the forest blueing in the distance, and the steep hills converging towards the river about two miles downstream.

"Why's it called Greblya?* There's no dam here, is there?"

"Who knows! Perhaps there was at one time. But now it's only the name of this place. There's the village, beyond those slopes over there. That's where Nyura goes to school and we move there when navigation closes."

"Why don't you live there all the time?"

"That'd be no good. Near the village the river's calm and easy to navigate, but here it's difficult. There," Uncle pointed to the left bank a little higher upstream, "looks like the bank, doesn't it? It's an island and behind it is the Staritsa, that's the old channel, and a little higher up there's another island and another side-channel."

"But don't the skippers know where to go?"

"They know all right, but the river doesn't know where it'll go next."

"Doesn't it always flow down the same channel?"

"Oh no, my lad, it doesn't," Uncle Efim chuckled. "That's the trouble! Time was when the steamers used to sail the side-channel a little higher upstream, and could even ply the Staritsa—it washed clear again—but this season they tried it and a steamer got stuck in the sand: the channel got shoaled up at high water. The river's like an unbroken horse, you see. You never know what it'll do next. Just now the channel's over here but before you know it a shoal'll be deposited and the channel'll run off to the left bank."

Kostya looked at the tranquil surface of the river and had his doubts. It did not look at all like a fiery, restive prancing horse. It was flowing quietly along, flowing now as it did yesterday, a year

* Greblya—dam.—*Tr.*

ago, a hundred years ago. . . . It flowed when the Zaporozhye Cossacks lived here and even earlier, in the time of Yaroslav the Wise and Vladimir. He could not imagine how during all that time people had failed to make a complete study of it, to learn it by heart like the multiplication table. This was not the sea after all. . . .

Uncle Efim apparently guessed Kostya's thoughts and smiled.

"Of course, it isn't wide here, doesn't have much elbow room. But that only makes it more difficult. There, see, I'll tell you about that place higher up," he pointed. "You can see a red buoy there. That's the mainstream near the right bank, then the shoal shifts it to the island and from there it heads for the buoy like an express train. Good? No, not at all. That buoy's moored on a stone bed, the Ridge we call it. There's a rock there we call the Devil's Tooth. It'll split anything, given the chance. And the current flows directly against it! See the water sparkling and whirling about it? It's all right at high water, but when the water falls, well, that's when skippers have to keep their weather eye open: when they see that red buoy they've got to steer clear to the left or else have trouble on their hands. Well, that's what our river is! It's up to all sorts of tricks. But a strict eye's kept on it, and it's not given a chance to do what it wants."

"But how is it possible to keep an eye on it?"

"There's a special service for that: skippers and us buoy-keepers. It's only the passenger who doesn't have to worry: the water's the same to him everywhere. But a trained eye can see everything: a whirlpool where it looks sort of quiet and smooth on top, a shoal or sand-bank likely to wash up where the water's rippling. Soon as a sand-bank or shoal comes up we mark it off, which is as much as saying the place is dangerous and must be given a wide berth."

"But when it's marked, is it safe then?"

"Yes, then it's safe. Spars and buoys during the day, and lights to show the way at night. With these in front of him a skipper can go ahead without worrying. Nothing can happen if he watches them."

"You mean nothing ever happens here?"

"What do you expect to happen?"

"Well, shipwrecks for instance."

Uncle Efim looked at Kostya in surprise, took the pipe out of his mouth and laughed so heartily that a magpie sitting on an overturned boat flew off screeching loudly in fright.

"Shipwrecks? But who'll let things get that far?"

"Well, it happens. On the railways, you know, the rails burst, or something else happens. . . ."

"We don't have rails, and the river doesn't burst," Uncle Efim laughed. "Why are you so blood-thirsty? You want accidents?"

"No . . . simply. . . . Well, something interesting *does* happen here, doesn't it?"

"Everything's interesting here."

"Really! Well, after you've marked everything, what then?"

"Then we've got to look after everything. Take soundings, see to the lights on the buoys, put them out in the mornings. Keep the gear in good condition."

"Why do you have paraffin lamps on the buoys? Wouldn't electric ones be better?"

"Of course. Some sectors on the Dnieper have been electrified and the time will come when we'll have electric lamps too. But in the meantime, the paraffin lamps must be kept in order. But that's not our only job. We've got enough work. We'll start on some of it right away. Here, help me move that pile of driftwood."

Kostya carried an armful of branches, roots and various pieces of wood washed up by the river and dried long ago by the scorching June sun. Uncle Efim lighted a fire and suspended a pot of tar on a tripod over it. Kostya stirred the redolent black tar while Uncle Efim set about making a broad short-handled oakum brush.

"And me? What about me?" Nyura yelled, sliding down the slope. "You promised we'd do it all together, Daddy! You, Kostya and I! Didn't you? Why are you laughing, Daddy? Think we can't do it? Don't worry, we'll make a good job of it!"

"All right, all right," Uncle Efim said and made another brush.

"You'll Learn"

The tar formed big bubbles in the pot and then rose like boiling milk. Kostya and Nyura slipped a thick stick through the handle of the pot and carried the smoking fluid to the small boat.

"Here, you do this side. All right? And I'll do that. Let's see who's quickest and best."

There were some things he did not know how to do, but he would be able to manage this all right! He had seen a painter oil-paint the staircase wall at home. It was an easy business.

He dipped the brush into the hot tar and began making long strokes like he'd seen the painter do at home. The liquid pitch made faint sucking noises under the brush and formed a shining lacquer-like coat. Kostya dipped the brush again and made still longer strokes, while Nyura kept poking her brush at one spot.

"That won't do!" Uncle Efim said, coming up to Kostya.

"Why not?" he asked with surprise and disappointment.

"You're smearing the top. What you have to do is to fill every crack with the pitch. Look."

Nothing remained of Kostya's beautiful glossy surface. The entire painted part of the boat broke out in bubbles which burst and left ugly spots like pock-marks. Kostya tried to paint them over but the pitch now refused to spread evenly and stuck in lumps and streaks.

Kostya attentively watched what Nyura was doing and started copying her, rubbing and forcing the pitch into all the holes and cracks. This was much harder work than simply painting with the brush. Kostya soon grew tired and his results were still as poor as ever. Meanwhile, Nyura was going strong. She daubed away, pressing the tip of her tongue against her upper lip and brushing the hair from her eyes with her left hand every now and then.

"I'm leading! I'm winning! I've won!" she cried out jubilantly, waving her brush and skipping. But when she saw disappointment written all over Kostya's face she immediately grew serious and proposed in her usual chatterbox manner: "I know what, let's

do it together. What d'you say? We'll help each other. All right? And when we finish we'll ask Daddy for a ride in the boat. He doesn't let me go by myself, but I'm sure he will if it's the two of us. Can you row? You can't? Oh, but it's so easy. I'll teach you."

When they finished tarring, Uncle Efim inspected the work and pointed out the faults. Kostya blushed, for the faults were all on his side of the boat.

"Don't be a fault-finder, Daddy!" Nyura said. "He's tried his best, honest to goodness!"

"But you can't paint cracks with goodness, you've got to do it with pitch."

"All right, we'll do it right away! Remember your promise? You'll let us have the boat? You will?"

"What if you get drowned?"

"Us drown? D'you really mean that?" the girl's red pigtails flew up so indignantly, that they looked as though they were going to fly off altogether. "Why, I swam across the Staritsa! You've forgotten that? Didn't I? And Kostya, why, you should see how he dives! Did you know he can dive? Even I can't dive like that. Here, Kostya, show Daddy! So he shouldn't think."

"Aye, he could do with a drop o'water to him. Look how he's smudged himself all over," Uncle Efim laughed.

"Good gracious!" Nyura exclaimed, clasping her hands. "Come, let's rub it off with sand before it dries!"

She grasped Kostya's hand and dragged him to the water's edge. Kostya rubbed the pitch marks with wet sand until his skin burned painfully, but they did not come off completely.

"Never mind," Nyura comforted him. "Once I accidentally sat on some tar and my dress got stuck to it—even that came clean in the wash. Don't worry, it'll wear off by itself."

After dinner they turned the boat over on its keel and shoved it into the water, but Uncle Efim did not let them go out in it; the wind was churning up the water and he did not think it was safe to let the youngsters go out by themselves. To console them he said, "I'll take you with me when I make the rounds this evening."

But evening was still far off. Nyura ran home and began peeling potatoes for supper. After wandering about the shore for a while Kostya joined her and tried to help, but he was so clumsy that when he finished with a huge potato, only a little nut was left. This made Nyura open her eyes wide.

"What kind of a chap are you that you can't do anything? Haven't you ever peeled potatoes? Who does them at home? Your mother? And you don't help her?"

This hurt Kostya and he went away. Just think of it, a potato! Why, he knew how to do much harder and more important things.

But all that was at home, in Kiev; here he did not know what to do with himself, so he went to see what Uncle Efim was doing. Uncle Efim was making a spare crosspiece for a buoy. White and red buoys were standing in a row on the beach and further off some striped spars were leaning against a cross-beam between two poles.

"What are you so gloomy about? Got nothing to do? Here, square this spar."

This was a real man's job! Not like peeling potatoes!

Kostya started working with a will. And the axe was nice to handle, too—light and sharp, and the handle was curved like a bow, and smooth as though it had been varnished.

"What are you cutting the ground for?" Uncle Efim asked. "It'll stand any amount of cutting and you'll only blunt the axe for your pains. You set the spar on a block, and then go ahead."

Uncle Efim was right. When it hit the wood the axe actually did strike the ground. Kostya pushed a log under the thick end of the spar, but now the thin end jumped at every blow and the spar slid off the block and had to be fixed in position each time.

"Here, do it like this," Uncle Efim said and stood the spar against the crosspiece, putting a block under the thick end. "It's handier that way."

Of course, it was handier. Kostya held the spar with one hand and tried to square it with the other. But the axe was not as easy to handle as it had seemed at first. It either skimmed past the spar, shaving off only a thin sliver before hitting the block or bit so

deeply into the wood that Kostya had all he could do to pull it out. Besides, it was not so light, after all, growing heavier and heavier with each stroke. Kostya's elbows began to ache from its weight, but he did not give up until he had squared the spar and given it a point. The point turned out rough, blunt and all in splinters as though it had not been hewn with an axe but beaten out with a hammer.

"Never mind," Uncle Efim said, "you'll learn."

He took the axe from Kostya and with a few deft strokes cut off the long thick chips and the point immediately became long, thin and smooth.

"Well done!" Kostya admitted.

"That's nothing! I'm not such a hand with an axe. My grandfather, your great-grandfather, that is, was a regular artist with it. He built so many houses that he even lost count of them. The fret-work patterns he could make with his axe were a lesson for any embroideress! At a pinch he could even shave with an axe."

Uncle Efim told how, once for a bet, his grandfather had made a chest of drawers with an axe, but Kostya rubbed his aching elbow and pondered.

"All the same, it's a leftover," he said finally.

"What is?"

"The axe. It's outdated. D'you think there're going to be axes under communism? Under communism there won't be any difference between manual and mental work. And what's working with an axe? Only manual work."

"I don't know how things'll be under communism. I can't speak for others, but I like this leftover. A very useful thing! If you know how to use it, of course. In manual labour you've got to use your head, too. Aye. As in everything else."

Kostya took this as a hint at his own clumsiness and fell silent; but all the same he stuck to his own opinion.

Evening approached at last. Nyura and Kostya carried the lanterns to the boat, Uncle Efim took the oars and they pushed off.

"Listen," Nyura commanded. "I'll row first and you watch! Then we'll row together. All right? You'll learn that way. It's quite easy. Look!"

Pressing the tip of her tongue against her upper lip, she gripped the handles and, bending far forward, began rowing. Soon little beads of sweat burst out on her temples and along the sides of her nose, but she did not stop chattering.

"You see? It's so easy. I bend forward, see? And swing the oars back. Then I dip them and pull. Easy, isn't it?"

"All right, let me have a try now," Kostya said. "No, let me row by myself, you sit in my place."

Kostya had been in a boat before, but he had rowed only once and for a very short time—his first attempt was not a very happy one: he had splashed water all over Mother's new frock and had the oars taken away from him. But now, seeing how smoothly Nyura was working the oars and how fast the boat was moving, he decided rowing was really very easy.

He took the oars, made himself comfortable and spread out his legs. O-one! The oars went into the water far up the shafts and Kostya found it hard to pull them out again. He saw he should not dip them so deep. Two! The oars skimmed the crests of the little waves and crashed against the sides of the boat. Aha, he knew now—he mustn't hurry. He pushed the oars forward, dipped them carefully, but for some reason one of them cut through the water lightly with the side of its blade instead of pulling, while the other went in deep, churning up the water and making the boat tip over to one side.

Shame and the effort brought the blood to Kostya's face and he stole glances at Nyura and Uncle. Uncle Efim was smoking his pipe imperturbably and did not even turn an eye-lash when Kostya splashed him from head to foot, but Nyura tensely followed the oars and her mobile features reflected every effort Kostya made, as though she and not he were at the oars. But this only irritated him. He tried harder, but the more he tried the worse he rowed. The oars that at first had seemed light became heavy as lead and time and again they either twisted in the water

or slipped out of his hands. The water turned thick, pasty, as though it were sticking to the oars, and the boat which had looked small and light to him, now seemed a big and heavy barge. You needed an engine to move it, not oars. On top of everything sand-martins, filling the air with mocking cries, flew over his head.

"Hold on!" Uncle Efim called. "You'll need help here: we're getting to the rapids. Both of you row."

Kostya secretly breathed a sigh of relief, for he was completely in. Nyura sat down beside him and they each took hold of an oar with both hands.

"When I say one, dip the oars, two, dry them, that means pull them out of the water. Ready? O-one—two! One—two!"

Naturally, it was easier rowing together. True, even now the oar did not fully obey Kostya—sometimes it went deep into the water or slid along the surface and the boat swerved from side to side, but Uncle Efim kept steadying the boat with the steering-oar and they made fair headway. Now Kostya realised the current had not quickened at all. Uncle Efim had seen he was tired and said that about the rapids to spare his feelings.

Gradually he learned to lower the oar to the right depth—it was easier to row like that—and the boat went faster, but just when Kostya began rowing properly and enjoying himself Uncle Efim raised his hand.

"That's enough, children! We've got to turn to the Ridge and you won't manage the boat there; moreover, you're tired, I dare say."

He sat down to row himself, Nyura took the steering-oar while Kostya lay down on the bow and looked into the water. The current was really fast here! Uncle Efim rowed strongly, the water gurgled angrily around the sides and the boat moved forward in spurts, but at the end of every spurt it seemed to come against a soft but immovable wall, and each time Kostya thought the current would pull it back.

However, the red buoy over Devil's Tooth drew slowly nearer. It was bent over against the current and looked as though it were fighting with something that was trying to drag it down, under the

water. They were quite close to Devil's Tooth, and Kostya peered into the water, trying to make out the rock, but only a vague shadow showed in the dark depths.

Uncle Efim rowed to the buoy and lighted a lantern which he suspended on top of it. The boat was quickly carried far downstream, and the red light on the buoy looked dim and feeble in the early twilight.

Now they went upstream hugging the bank, lighted some more red buoys, then crossed to the other side to light the white ones as they went downstream.

"Give us a turn now. All right, Daddy? We'll manage, I think. Right, Kostya?"

Nyura resolutely took an oar and Uncle Efim did not protest. It was a great deal easier rowing downstream. They could have stopped rowing altogether, as the current was carrying the boat along and all it required was a bit of steering. However, they rowed lustily and Kostya found his rowing improving with each stroke. He glanced at Uncle Efim from time to time to find out whether the latter saw how well he was doing. Uncle Efim understood Kostya's glances and nodded approvingly. On the return trip, against the current, Uncle Efim took over and the tired youngsters rested.

The buoy on Devil's Tooth was no longer in sight, only the red light was bobbing on the water and seemed to hang and sway in the air. The few gulls that had circled above the river had gone to roost somewhere, and the noisy flock of sand-martins had settled for the night. It was quiet on the water and above it. The ripples grew smooth and the river again became still and glassy. There was only the tinkling of the drops falling from the oars and the occasional flash of a fish tail, making smooth rings that slowly widened out and disappeared.

Kostya was glad that even his vivacious cousin had grown quiet. With her eyes wide open she looked at the slumbering river, at the lights and was thinking of something. Kostya's hands were hurting, and he too was thinking. What about? About everything at once. Where Mother was—he thought she was probably in

Khakhovka by now; how Lyolka had most likely played some prank and was listening to a scolding by their neighbour Maria Afanasyevna and looking back at her with perfectly innocent eyes; how many fish Fyodor had caught and whether the spoon-bait he had made out of a tin can was as good as he expected; what the score was in the football match between the Kiev Dynamo team and Shakhtyor—their match at the Central Stadium had been set for that day.

Makarov was a tip-top goalie. Kostya had confidence in him, but as for the forwards. . . .

How quiet it was here. In Kiev it was never like this. And though it all was very interesting, he would not want to live here. Today the same as yesterday, and tomorrow the same as today. The buoys never changed. Making the rounds to light them, then another trip to put them out. And, anyway, there was nothing much to a buoy! Now a lighthouse was different! When a storm broke out it was really exciting!

"Oh, Kostya! Daddy, look at his hands!"

White blisters had swelled up on Kostya's palms. Two of them had burst and left dirty red sores. Only now he felt how his hands burned and the sores smarted.

"Never mind, it's nothing to be upset about, they'll heal!" Uncle Efim said.

The boat grounded into the sand. Nyura jumped out first, followed by Kostya, who then helped Uncle Efim to drag the boat out of the water and carry the oars and spare lanterns. It was almost dark, but the stars hardly showed in the sky.

"Bad weather, eh?" Uncle Efim said looking at the sky.

The lantern-hoops cut Kostya's aching hands and he impatiently moved his weight from one foot to another, waiting for Uncle Efim to take the lantern from him. The red light over Devil's Tooth looked at Kostya, winking mockingly. . . .

The next day did not bring any bad weather at all, and the sun was so hot that even the sky went pale. Again and again Nyura and Kostya ran to bathe in the river, but their bodies dried as soon as they climbed back to the bank and they felt like going in again.

"Hey, tadpoles, enough plunging into the water," Uncle Efim shouted out to them. "You're shivering!"

"Daddy's right. I do feel sort of cold," Nyura said, her teeth chattering. She plucked a dock-leaf and stuck it on her nose. "So it won't peel," she explained. "Otherwise you'll go around with a peeling nose. We have a girl in our form—she covers herself up like an old lady and smears her face with sour-cream so it won't sunburn. One day she fell asleep in the garden and a kitten came along and licked off all the sour-cream. Funny, isn't it? The boys laughed at her and said that the next time a pig would come and gobble her up as if she were a sandwich. Are the girls in your form nice?"

"We have no girls."

"How's that? Where've they all gone to?"

"They're separate. In other schools. Schools for boys and schools for girls. See?"

But Nyura did not see. Was there anything wrong in having boys and girls together? Was it to keep them from fighting? In their school they did not fight, although they had Senya Guz who deserved a hiding long ago and she would give him one the first chance she got. And, on the whole, it was better together, much more interesting! She was not the kind of girl to let the boys get the better of her! In her class, only one boy, Misha the Gipsy, had marks as good as hers. Why was it bad then if they studied together?

Kostya could not tell her because he did not know why himself.

"Race you to Roaring Gully?" Nyura suggested.

"Come on. But why is it called Roaring?" Kostya asked when they were running.

"I don't know. Perhaps because it makes a lot of noise when there's water in it. In the spring, or when it's raining, you know, it behaves like it's crazy! You can't cross or ride over it—just goes on frothing and boiling without stop!"

"What a long-legs you are! I can't catch up with you. . . ."

"I knew it!" Nyura smiled happily. "Do you know how fast I can run? No one can catch up with me. When we have races, you

know, I'm always first! Even in Form 7 they can't run as fast. Semyon Semyonovich—our sports master—says my legs are positively talented. That's funny, isn't it, because how can anyone have talented legs? A person has talent, of course. That's so, isn't it? Have you any talent? I don't know about myself. I think I haven't. . . .”

“Let Me Introduce You!”

Roaring Gully did not justify its name at all. It was a deep ravine with steep clay slopes, mute and worn out with heat. Crevices zigzagged along the bottom; sparse grass grew along the tops of the slopes, but lower down the water had washed away the earth leaving jagged stones that formed a series of steps.

“Look!” Nyura cried, running to the bottom of the ravine and holding up her hands. “When there's water here it reaches my hands!”

“That's like being on an island, then. You can't go anywhere and no one can come to you.”

“That's right! Of course, you can go by the river, only it's awfully far. There's another way, about five miles higher up, across the bridge where the road runs. Shall we climb to the top? You'll see something really grand,” she said, scrambling up the high slope of the gully.

Puffing and gasping for breath, Kostya followed her. He reached the top and stood spellbound.

Luxuriant cherry orchards spread along the hillsides which were dotted by a few white cottages and tall dark Lombardy poplars towering candle-like into the sky. The buoy-keeper's cottage nestled against the bank and looked like a doll's house in the distance. The island jutted its yellow spits and thick mane of osier-bush into the river; weeping willows bent over the Staritsa as though lost in thought, helplessly drooping their long branches; green waves of grain stretched out to the very horizon and melted against the heat-paled sky. The hot air wafted over in quivering

streams. To Kostya it seemed as if the air itself were chirping and singing and not the grasshoppers and crickets.

"Well? Haven't you anything to say?" Nyura said, tugging Kostya impatiently by his arm and looking into his face. "It's nice, isn't it? You don't feel like talking? Neither do I. When I come here I feel like just looking and not saying a word."

But she could not remain silent long and started showing and explaining to Kostya everything they saw from the steep bluff. She spoke as if it were she who had made all this beauty around them and now had full right to take pride in her handiwork.

A drawn-out whistle reached them from a little hollow close by. "That's the boys calling me. Misha the Gipsy. He can do better than that—with trills!"

She put her fingers in her mouth and gave a piercing whistle.

"Can you whistle? Come on. . . . Not bad!" she said in expert approval. "Not bad at all. I know girls shouldn't whistle. But what if you have to? For something important? You've got to know how, haven't you? I think you ought to know everything! Don't you think so?"

Two boys appeared from the little hollow and approached quickly, but seeing a stranger next to Nyura they slowed down.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Nyura cried out to them. "Come here. Let me introduce you!" she said folding her hands decorously. "These are our boys. This one," she pointed at a chubby boy with a close-cropped round head and a plump good-natured face, "is Timofey, or Timka for short. He's fat, so he's lazy. And we also call him the Weller because he's always saying 'well'."

Lazy Timofey was not offended in the least and looked inquisitively at Nyura, waiting for her to say something else. But she turned to the other boy, who was rather short and had dark eyes and hair. In contrast to his sluggish friend, he was always on the move. Even when he was standing still he gave the impression of being in a great hurry.

"This is Misha the Gipsy. He's not a Gipsy at all, but you see he's so dark that we call him a Gipsy. And this, boys, is Kostya. He's my own cousin. His own mother is sister to—"

"Your own father," Misha prompted slyly.

"That's right!" Nyura agreed artlessly. "Well, why don't you introduce yourselves?"

She wanted them to get introduced like grown-ups, shake hands and say "How d'you do", or something like that, but the boys had no intention of shaking hands and studied each other attentively.

"Stop bothering us! Who wants to get introduced?—" Timofey drawled. "Come on, Misha."

"Where to?"

"Swimming, if you want to know. Why?"

"We'll come too. All right, Kostya?"

"Come along, then," Timofey said.

"Last one's a donkey!" Nyura yelled and tore headlong down the slope to the river.

Misha and Kostya raced after her. Kostya immediately fell behind as he was still unused to running barefoot and his feet were very tender. But Timofey did not even dream of hurrying. He took careful, heavy steps and said, either to comfort Kostya or to justify himself: "No use trying to race the Rocket! She always dashes off as if she'd been fired from a gun. There's no hurry, we'll get there in good time."

On the bank Misha and Nyura were arguing hotly over who had reached the river first, but it was clear that Nyura had won. This was admitted by Kostya and Timofey.

"All right," Misha said, his eyes burning angrily, "we'll see who's fastest in the water!"

"Who cares? You may beat me, but Kostya—"

"Your own cousin?" Misha mocked. "We've seen cousins like that before."

He took a running start and plunged into the water, and Kostya, tingling with excitement, followed suit.

Timofey dipped his foot to try the water, then walked in up to his knees and, scooping the water with his palms, carefully sprinkl-

ed himself. Nyura jumped in and splashed a fountain of water over him.

"Oh, you, stop it!" Timofey shivered, waving his arms. "Please, don't! Oh, don't do it!"

Nyura tugged at his hand and he plumped into the water.

"What a wild cat you are!" he exclaimed spluttering. "You ought to be tied up."

"Just you try!" Nyura laughed.

Misha and Kostya were swimming side by side. At first Kostya shot ahead, but soon Misha caught up and they cut through the water shoulder to shoulder. Kostya thought the over-arm would not get him ahead and went over to the side-stroke. Misha did the same.

Then Kostya turned his face against the water and worked away furiously with his arms and legs. However, when he raised his head for a second, he saw that Misha had also gone over to the crawl and was ahead by at least a yard.

Kostya came out of the water and lay down silently on the sand. Nyura sat beside him, sharing his disappointment.

"That's all because of Semyon Semyonovich, our sports master," she sighed. "*He* taught him!"

Meanwhile Misha was boasting of his victory to Timofey.

"That's training for you!" he said proudly. "Maybe if I train enough I'll be a champion!"

"Why not?" Timofey said judicially. "You might. Well, I think I'll have a swim, too."

In swimming he had a style all his own, calculated to spend the least energy possible: he walked along the shore upstream, waded in and turned over on his back, letting the current carry him down.

"Don't go to sleep, Timofey. The crayfish'll eat you!" Nyura cried out to him.

"Don't worry, they won't," he called back calmly and turned towards the bank.

"What a lazybones you are, Timka," Misha upbraided him. "Who swims like that? Like a log. . . ."

"I wouldn't say so," Timofey replied after some reflection. "A log's better—it's light. . ." and looked in surprise as his friends rolled with laughter.

Kostya did not laugh. His pride had been hurt and he was trying to think of a way of showing his superiority over the fidgety Gipsy.

"Let's dive," he suggested off-handedly.

A big, unsteady boat with a high bow and stern was rocking in the water at its mooring nearby. All four of them climbed on this boat. Nyura dived first. Timofey followed her, flopping on his belly. He did not even sink, but remained on the surface and was now swimming back to the boat. With a contemptuous curl of his lips, Misha sprang up and dropped into the water straight as a candle, feet first. Kostya waited for him to come up, then flexed his knees and sprang into the air, dropping into the water without raising a single splash. It looked as though he continued his flight there, so smoothly did his body come up to the surface.

The others were silent, and Misha's silence told Kostya more than the frank admiration on Timofey's face. But this was not enough for Kostya, he thirsted for complete triumph.

"Let's try rocking the boat," he said.

Nyura, Misha and Timofey stood on the bow and Kostya on the stern facing them, and they began rocking the boat like a see-saw. The stern flew higher and higher. Timing the movement of the boat, Kostya, back to the water, leaped into the air, described a wide arc and dived in, coming to the surface near the stern.

"Beautiful wasn't it? I told you, I told you!" Nyura chattered away happily and looked at everybody as though she and not Kostya had made this unusual dive.

"It was a good dive," Misha the Gipsy sighed and stretched out his hand to help Kostya climb back to the boat. "Will you teach me?"

"If you like!" Kostya said magnanimously. "It's quite easy." And he told and showed them how to do it.

Misha repeated his movements diligently, but they were only a poor copy.

"I'll learn!" he said stubbornly.

"Of course you will!" Kostya agreed.

Kostya had shown his superiority, it was not easy to better him. He was happy and could afford to be generous.

They lay down on the sand to warm themselves and get their breath back.

"D'you live in Kiev all the time?" Timofey asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. We still haven't been there. . . ."

"What of it?" Misha interrupted. "We're going there on an excursion next year."

"Well, that's next year! Is it very beautiful there?"

"Uh-huh."

Kostya described Kiev, its steep streets bordered with chestnut-trees; the brightly lit expanse of the Kreshchatik; the gardens high up over the Dnieper; the Central Stadium; the football matches, of which Kostya never missed a single one; the endless stream of people filling the Krasnoarmeiskaya and Saksaganskaya streets after a match, and causing all the trams and trolleybuses to stop and wait until they'd gone. . . .

The others listened with rapt attention and Kostya redoubled his efforts. He told them about Vladimir Hill and the Green Theatre; about the Shevchenko monument, the building of the Supreme Soviet which he had seen only from the outside but knew in detail from descriptions by people who had been inside; he told them about the Opera House where he saw the *Cinderella* ballet. He did not like the ballet much: people walking about to the music on tiptoe or jumping—they jumped pretty well, he had to admit!—waving their hands about without saying a word. On the whole it was not bad: they showed all sorts of tricks and the scenery was beautiful. But *Ivan Susanin*, the opera—that was quite different! He even felt his flesh creeping when he listened. . . . He said if they came to Kiev he would show them much more than they would see on an excursion. He'd take them over the whole city. . . .

A heavily-laden vessel, puffing thin wisps of smoke from a thin funnel aft, moved downstream.

"What sort of a steamer's that?" Kostya asked.

"It's not a steamer, it's a self-propelled barge. Diesel-run," Misha replied.

"Uh-huh. It's the *Kirghizia*," Nyura confirmed. "Let's ride the waves."

Misha, Timofey and Nyura sprang into the water and swam towards the barge. Kostya followed them. The thought that if Mother saw him now flashed through his mind, but he immediately shut his eyes and shook his head to chase the thought away, for if Mother did actually see him it would mean trouble. . . .

The fairway flowed close to the bank and the barge turned towards them.

"What do you think you're doing, young devils?" someone shouted from the *Kirghizia*. "You'll drown like puppies!"

"No, we won't!" Nyura yelled back. "There's no water can drown us. . . ."

"And no fire can burn us up!" Misha chanted, swimming next to her.

The wave started by the *Kirghizia*'s bow rushed toward the bank, lightly rocking the swimmers. Expecting it, Timofey turned over on his back with his belly to the sun. The others also turned over and, rocked gently by the waves, let the current carry them along.

"She's going to Kakhovka," Misha said when they were back on the sand, looking at the barge disappearing downstream.

"How d'you know? Perhaps she's not going to Kakhovka at all, but somewhere else!" Nyura argued.

"She's going to Kakhovka," Misha repeated obstinately.

A big smoke-grey tug laboured slowly down the river, towing two barges that were in the water almost up to their decks. When the tug passed them they made out the name *Kremlin* painted in red on its side.

"All of them are going to Kakhovka now," Misha said in a voice which showed he did not expect to be contradicted. "They need a lot of everything there, you know!"

"If we could only go there!" Nyura said yearningly.

"They don't need people like us!" Misha growled. "They need experts there."

"What about me? Can't I go there? I'll study and become an expert! I can take up whatever profession I choose!"

"All right, you'll be an expert. But when'll that be? By that time we'll have communism. A fat lot of good it'll do to get there when everything's finished!"

"You're stretching it too far," said Timofey who had been silent all the time. "What if we have communism by then, d'you think we'll have nothing to do? There'll be work enough for us."

"Well, that's a long time ahead. It'd be fun to go now!"

"My mother's gone to Kakhovka," Kostya told them.

"Really? What for?" they lifted their heads in interest.

"To make an inspection. She's a health inspector and went to see that everything's all right for the people working there."

"O-oh. . ." Misha drawled in disappointment. "That's nothing. She won't build anything, will she? The most important thing's to build."

"Maybe she'll build something—" Kostya ventured uncertainly.

"My dad'll soon be going to Kakhovka," said Timofey. "He's a tractor driver. He's got a book all about excavators and he'll go as soon as he's learned everything in it."

"Will he take you too?"

"That's not likely. I wouldn't go even if he wanted me to. I haven't finished my experiments."

"There, see that?" Misha laughed, turning to Kostya. "Some people want to go to the great construction projects and others want to grow watermelons."

"What watermelons?"

"The ones this Michurinist's growing. He thinks he's going to surprise the world with his watermelons!"

Timofey bent his head stubbornly and, glowering at Misha like a young bull, said gravely, "They'll want watermelons under communism, too."

"Of course! You couldn't build communism without your watermelons!"

"Well, you could, but it'll be still better with them! Those southern kinds won't ripen here, but I'll make 'em ripen. And I won't stop till I get 'em to do what I want. Would you give up your radio?"

"What a comparison! After all, that's engineering!"

It was obvious that this argument had started long since and there was no prospect of it ending soon. Misha glanced at the sun and got up.

"I'm going: have to go on duty soon," he said in a businesslike way. "Hey you, watermelon grower, are you going or staying?"

"Nothing to stay for. I'll go, too. Don't listen to him," he said to Kostya. "Come to my place, you'll see for yourself."

"That's it!" Nyura caught up. "We'll come together! All right, Kostya? 'Course we'll come!"

Timofey and Misha set off, but stopped after a few steps.

"Nyura, I say, Nyura!" Misha called. "Ask your dad for his boat, eh? Just for one night. You'll see, we'll catch a lot of fish!"

"He won't give it," Nyura said, shaking her head. "Know what? Let's ask together! I'll pave the way—all right?—and you come over and we'll ask. If we do it that way he may—"

"All right."

The two boys went off in the direction of the village, and Kostya and Nyura ran home.

On the Island

After dinner Timofey and Misha appeared on the river-bank carrying pails, little bundles and fishing-rods. But instead of going directly to the buoy-keeper's cottage, they dodged round a bend, then returned with their hands empty, and walked casually down the beach. Nyura saw these manoeuvres and started "paving the way".

"Daddy, does the boat we tarred still leak? D'you think we, Kostya and I that is, do you think we could manage it? You don't

suppose we could cross the Dnieper in it, for instance? He rows quite well now, you know. Don't you think he does? Well, if not the two of us, then three or four, perhaps. It's such a light boat! You said yourself a baby could manage it."

"What are you up to, Nyura?" Uncle Efim said, narrowing his eyes. "Out with it. Your pals are loafing about on the beach there, waiting for something, I suppose. What've you got up your sleeve?"

Nyura was afraid her "paving" would spoil everything.

"Nothing," she protested. "You can go and ask them. Hey, boys, come over here!"

Misha and Timofey stopped for a moment to discuss something, then Misha ran to them and Timofey remained behind.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Efim!" Misha called out merrily when he was still some distance away. "May we? Is it yes?" There was joy and impatience in every movement of his active little body.

"May you what?"

Misha stopped short, giving Nyura a reproachful, puzzled look: was this what she called "paving the way"?

"But we thought—We wanted to go to the island—to do some fishing there."

"Why can't you fish here?"

"You can't call that fishing," Misha said, his face and figure expressing supreme contempt. "You can't catch anything here. But on the Staritsa—that's where you can really fish! We wanted to go overnight. . . ."

"Overnight?" Uncle Efim actually whistled. "But who is going?"

"Us here," Misha pointed.

"No, that won't do. What about Timofey, doesn't he want to go? What's he shuffling about over there?"

"He wants to go, too. Only he said I should go and do the talking. Says he's no orator and would spoil things."

"Does that mean you're an orator?"

Misha laughed in embarrassment, not knowing what to reply, and beckoned his friend with his hand.

"Here's what we'll do," Uncle Efim said. "I'll let you have the boat on one condition only . . . if you take me along."

"Why! We—Why—Yes, of course!" the youngsters chorused gleefully.

"Oh, Daddy, aren't you a sly one, and aren't you a brick! When may we go? Now? Come on, boys, go and get your things!"

"You certainly are well prepared!" Uncle Efim said with a smile. "Go on, get your things and we'll go after I've made my rounds. Only Nyura, see you stock up enough bread for the whole crew, for they'll be hungry whether they catch any fish or not."

"Right away! I'll get potatoes and everything!" Nyura sang out and shot off home.

All the tackle and food was stowed away in the boat long before evening. Uncle Efim added a large tarpaulin and his canvas rain-coat, which was so hard and stiff that it rattled as a sheet of iron.

Although the sun crawled slowly across the sky, it finally did come down to the bluffs hiding the village, and Uncle Efim gave the word to get into the boat. Misha and Timofey took the oars, Nyura held the steering oar and Kostya and Uncle Efim went as passengers.

"All right, out with your things!" Uncle Efim said when the boat scraped its bow against the sandbar on the island. "Here's good fishing to you! Only remember, you're not to go in the water. If you won't keep our bargain, I'll never believe you again and won't ever let you have the boat."

"Don't worry, Uncle Efim, we won't break our bargain with you," Timofey said earnestly.

"It did happen—"

"Well, that was such a long time ago—" Timofey drawled uneasily, while Misha pretended he was very busy and wasn't listening.

"You haven't grown whiskers since!" Uncle Efim laughed and pushed away.

"Last summer we wanted to take the boat on the quiet, but Uncle Efim caught us. We said it had cut adrift from its moorings and that we had caught it. Well, naturally, he didn't believe us."

"Oh, shut up!" Misha said. "You'll be saying 'well' till morning. Pick up your bag!"

Timofey, Nyura and Misha made their way briskly through the osier brakes.

Their only thought was to find a likely spot and they were not interested in their surroundings.

But Kostya was terribly excited. In all his life—that was a long time to him—he had been on an island only once. On Trukhanov Island, and it could hardly be called an island. It bristled with boating stations, booths, kiosks and sign-boards which had BATHING RULES written on them. And there were always more people there than in the Kreshchatik itself.

There were no kiosks and rules, no boating stations and beach umbrellas on *this* island. And no people. A real desert island. Even the sand-martins hid in their holes and only swarms of midges were dancing above the bushes in the pink rays of the setting sun.

Kostya lagged behind his friends and turned to the left. The crunching of the dry white sand under his feet was barely audible; Kostya imagined he was forcing his way through a jungle of lianas, then through a mangrove thicket, with broken pieces of lava clattering under his feet, or treacherous quicksands sucking them in. His flesh began to creep and he actually felt his close-cropped hair rising on the back of his head.

He picked up a thick crooked branch, nerved himself and walked on with a springier step. He was ready for anything now. There were no wolves or bears here, but he was sure there were snakes. Kostya imagined a wickedly hissing cobra tensing its coils and darting at him, but he shattered its head with a lightning blow and threw aside its convulsively writhing body. . . . Or, for instance. . . .

The osier brakes broke off at the bank of a little creek. A huge frog sitting on a heap of branches, leaves and rubbish cast up by the water goggled in terror at Kostya. Then it leaped and, with a somersault, plopped into the water.

"Kostya! Kostya! Where are you? Halloo-oo!" Nyura called.

Kostya threw away the stick and straightened up. Nyura ran

through the noisily crackling undergrowth to the creek and appeared beside Kostya, her face expressing alarm.

"Why did you go off alone? I . . . you gave us such a fright!" she said indignantly, but, glancing at Kostya's face, changed her tone in a flash. "You've been imagining? Right? Me, too. When I'm alone I start fancying all kinds of things! Timka's already caught a perch. That big! No, not quite, but, here, this big anyway—come on!"

The boys had settled down to serious fishing. Timofey had thrown in his line and was sitting almost motionless, looking into the water. Misha the Gipsy was worrying enough for two. He jumped up every minute, snatched up the rod, sat down again, hissed angrily at Timofey whenever the fish nibbled, kept changing the bait on his own line, spat long and excitedly on the worms and fussed about so much that if his catch had depended on that he would have had a full pail long ago. But his catch so far consisted of only two little roaches, while Timofey already had half a dozen of them and quite a large perch.

"What are you sitting around like a dummy for? Can't you see you've got a bite. A bite, I tell you!" Misha raged.

"No it isn't. It's only nibbling," Timofey said unhurriedly. "Let it swallow the bait first. Don't fuss about for nothing, you won't catch anything that way." Suddenly he pulled his rod out of the water with a deftness that surprised Misha; a streak of silver flashed at the end of the line.

"Call this fishing?" Misha scornfully muttered through clenched teeth. "If we had a net it'd be different!"

They all realised he said this because he was envious and annoyed that he did not catch anything while Timofey did. He picked up his rods and went to another place so as not to see Timofey's good luck.

Meanwhile Kostya and Nyura gathered a big pile of dry osier twigs. Then Nyura began peeling potatoes, while Kostya sat down with his rods away from Timofey and Misha. But he did not have much luck and did not know what to blame it on: Uncle Efim's tackle, or the place he had chosen. He picked up his three little

roaches and went to the other end of the island, near the main channel. The rapid current had washed away the bank here and next to the overhanging bank the water was raging and swirling in a whirlpool. Kostya stuck his hook into a small roach and threw in the line. For about half a minute the float remained stationary in the water, then sank suddenly. Kostya jerked up his rod and groaned with despair, watching a baby pike break away.

He baited his largest hook with the second roach. As soon as he threw the line into the water it was all but pulled out of his hands. He struck and began running the line in, but the fish fought desperately, almost snapping the line. With the sweat running down his face and his heart thumping in a mingling of fright and excitement, Kostya let the line out a little and walked along the bank—he did not have a landing-net and knew he could not drag the fish up the bank either, as that would give it a chance to break away and slip back into the water. Luckily there was a strip of sandy beach below him. He jumped down and pulled his catch towards it. The fish had a black back, a huge mouth filled with teeth and wicked glassy eyes. There was no stick or stone Kostya could use to stun it, so he quickly seized it by the gills, falling to the ground with the pike thrashing madly under him.

Kostya snapped the line, left the rods lying on the sand and, still gripping the pike by its gills with both hands, marched off holding it out in front of him like a boiling samovar. The pike pommelled his stomach and bare feet with its tail and kept opening and shutting its mouth soundlessly, a piece of line still sticking out of it.

Nyura's shrieks of terror mixed with admiration, and Misha's envious silence were sweeter to Kostya than any praise.

"That's what I call a catch!" Timofey said coming up. "Caught it with a rod?"

"Yes!" Kostya replied, choking with happiness.

"Live bait?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Super!"

Timofey poked his finger into the fish's flabby white belly; the pike twitched convulsively and hit his hand violently with its tail.

"Look at the brute!" Timofey said in amazement, snatching away his hand. He stuck a willow branch into the pike's mouth; it worked its jaws furiously and Timofey showed the shredded stump: "See? What if it had been your finger?"

The pike was thrown on the sand where it made a few more frantic leaps and then became still. Kostya ran to fetch his rods. The water had washed away the stringer with the last roach, but Kostya was not sorry. Timofey and Misha picked some ruffs off their stringers and gave them to Nyura for the soup. The sun had set and the fish would not bite any more.

Sticking live bait on their hooks, Kostya and Misha threw out their lines and tied them down firmly, just in case some catfish came along.

Nyura spread a piece of cloth on the ground and busied herself with the pike. Kostya volunteered to clean a ruff, but pricked his hands on the fins of the slippery fish and he let Timofey finish the job. Timofey set about the task confidently and unhurriedly: he removed the prickly fins, gutted the fish, then took up another and by the time Nyura was through with the pike, he had all the ruffs ready for the pot.

Meanwhile Misha lighted a fire. The dry thin twigs blazed up like matches, then the thick boughs hissed and crackled and caught fire too. The flame danced over the dark osier-bush tangle, and cast a reflection across the entire width of the Staritsa channel. The grey willows there had become black in the darkness and looked like huge animals lurking on the edge of the water.

The smell of laurel leaf and pepper came from the water boiling in the pot. The hungry boys, their mouths watering, watched Nyura throw in salt, potatoes and the fish.

Kostya sat down a little way off and looked into the river. The reflection of the fire, the black willows and the gloomy, cold glassy surface of the Staritsa seemed to assume vague and exciting shapes. Reality unnoticeably melted away and, half-awake and half-

dreaming, he saw hazy but grim and fascinating visions of unknown worlds, beasts and monsters with himself in their midst. Terrible dangers dogged his steps, but he advanced against them fearlessly. . . . But suddenly he heard a far-off rustling, the thud of steps and the crackling of branches. . . . Something huge and black was approaching him. . . . Kostya's heart stopped beating and began to sink somewhere. . . .

"How's the catch, my young anglers?" he heard Uncle Efim saying. "Catch enough for soup? Or shall we have only potatoes for supper?"

"We did! We did!" Nyura cried out exultantly. "Oh, Daddy, you should see what a pike Kostya's caught! Such a big one! Terribly big!"

Nyura and Misha kept interrupting each other as they told Uncle Efim about the catch and about Kostya's pike. Kostya joined in. Only Timofey was silent. He busily mixed the soup, tasted it and announced, "Supper's ready."

Kostya thought he'd never tasted anything so wonderful. He ate until he was utterly exhausted and sweating; he would have gone on eating but there was no more room.

Uncle Efim spread his raincoat and tarpaulin on the cool sand and lay down with his feet towards the fire. But no one felt like sleeping yet.

"Why are you silent, my young friends?" Uncle Efim asked.

The fire gave a loud crack and threw out small white-hot coals and sparks. Nyura shuddered.

"Just like a gun-shot," she said in confusion.

"Oh, you scary-cat!" Misha said, disdainfully thrusting out his lip. "What if it were a real shot? You'd probably have died of fright."

"Me? I'm not afraid of anything! Am I, Daddy? This was unexpected and that's why I shivered. Otherwise it wouldn't have scared me a bit!"

"What if you lived in Korea?" Timofey asked.

"I'd show those brutes then!" Nyura replied, shaking her fist.

"They burned up the whole country there, in Korea," Kostya

said sternly. "They used bombs and napalm. That's a sort of petrol, only jellied. All the towns and villages there have been destroyed. Our Young Pioneer leader read us an account by an American journalist who wrote that only blue ash remained of the villages. . . ."

The youngsters fell silent. They imagined themselves in a country they had never seen, where planes roared and screeched overhead and bombs fell without end; they saw the entire country, all the mountains and valleys enveloped in a sheet of flame that left nothing but a greyish-blue ash. . . .

Kostya felt ashamed of the things he had fancied just a while ago. Why think up all sorts of monsters and horrors when there were people more terrible than any monster? He decided that if he were going to be a sailor he would join the Navy, or go to a naval school.

The others were probably thinking of the same thing because suddenly Timofey, glaring as though he were arguing with somebody, said in a dogged voice:

"I'm going to be a tankist. My father was a tankist. And I'm going to be one, too." And he fell silent.

"What else?" Misha said with a mocking laugh. "Only a tank can hold you now. There'll be iron on all sides and wood in the middle."

"So what! It's not like fiddling with those screws of yours."

"Lay off, fellows," Nyura said. "And I'll be . . . I don't know what I'll be. I'd like to be everything at once. A geologist, an engineer, a scientist. . . . Only, perhaps, an aviator'll be the best! Right? Even now when I shut my eyes I think I'm actually flying. . . ."

"Off the bed," Misha added derisively.

Nyura gave him a withering look.

"I don't care if girls aren't accepted. I'll make them take me! I'll go straight to Moscow and make them take me, see if I don't!" Her large eyes shone with such an angry blue fire that no one doubted she would get what she wanted. She turned to her father and asked, "Right, Daddy?"

"Yes, little girl. Naturally it's always best to choose a profession you like. Daring and ability are needed in everything, otherwise you'll perish and let others down. We had a case once on our destroyer—"

"Uncle Efim, were you really in the Navy?" Misha asked excitedly.

"Yes. In the Baltic Fleet all through the war. But this happened at the beginning, when the Germans had only just broken into the Baltic and our warships weren't laid up yet. One day our destroyer was on patrol duty. There was a light mist, so we didn't have to fear an attack from the air, but were wary of the water—German submarines were on the loose and there were more mines than anyone could count! Mines of all kinds. They put everything they had into the water, old and new. Well, as our destroyer moved along, our look-out suddenly called out: 'Mine to starboard!' Sure enough, an old-type contact mine, with horns, was bobbing in the water. It was quite some distance away but the officer of the watch reported to the skipper and we changed course—the destroyer backed away to shoot at it. However, though we moved back to the correct distance, the officer of the watch held up giving the command, saying: 'Strange kind of mine, that.' All of us looked, some through glasses, others shading their eyes with their hands. We saw there was something different about this mine, but could not understand what. However, one sailor—his eyes were sharper than any spyglass—came up to the officer and said: 'Permit me, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, to report that there's a man on that mine.' We wondered how that could have happened. How did the man get on the mine? This was not a swing in a kindergarten, for swings like that could throw you into the sky. The skipper ordered a boat to be lowered to see whether this was not some dirty fascist trick. If so, he wanted to prevent anyone else from getting caught. On the other hand, it could be some poor soul hanging on. The skipper told the lieutenant not to approach the mine too closely and take undue risks and to act as the situation demanded. The boat pushed off and we rowed carefully towards the mine, not too near, but near enough for us to see everything clearly. Sure enough, there was a

man hanging on to the mine, clutching to the horns. And as far as we could make out this man was one of our sailors: his jersey and his face, everything was Russian. We called—he was alive, turned his head but did not reply.

“‘Hey brother, quit hugging that beauty!’ one of the sailors called out to him. ‘Paddle over here!’

“‘Stop those jokes, they’re out of place!’ the lieutenant said. ‘It’s no time to grin when a man’s hugging death in the water!’

“‘Jump off that devil’s toy and swim over here!’ the coxswain called out.

“But the man only turned his head, couldn’t say a word and couldn’t let go. Apparently his hands had frozen to the horns and he had lost his strength either through exposure or fear. That was some dilemma, I can tell you. We couldn’t approach the mine on the boat and couldn’t throw a rope end, as he couldn’t catch it and it might hit one of the horns and blow him and ourselves to kingdom come.

“One of our crew up and said:

“‘Permit me, Comrade Lieutenant, to try and take him off.’

“‘All right,’ the lieutenant said, ‘only be careful.’

“The sailor pulled off his clothes, tied the end of a rope round his waist and jumped into the water. The line was fed out gradually from the boat. When he swam up to the mine he saw that though the man seemed to understand everything, he couldn’t say a word and his hands were dead numb. The sailor thought over his next step. He had reached the mine, but how was he to take the man off? There wasn’t a big swell, but it heaved the swimmer up and down and that devil’s toy danced so as to make it dangerous to come near it. Our sailor swam up to the man from behind, gripped him by the hair—it was a good thing he had thick, long hair — and began prying the fingers loose with the other hand. He had a hard time of it. The water was icy but our lad felt hot. That man’s fingers were like hooks, they were that frozen. Slowly he tore loose one hand, then the other, and pushed off the mine with all his might—the sailors watching on the boat started pulling in the rope. He held the man with one hand and swam with the other.

The sailors on the boat saw that the man's hands were raised and seemed to have frozen in that position, like those of saints on icons. Meanwhile, that hateful mine slowly drifted after the two men—the current was carrying it along. Well, on the boat the sailors hauled in the line pulling them almost under the water to get them on board quickly. At last, they were dragged in and pulled into the boat. Later the mine was blown up, naturally. And that man came round. They rubbed him down with alcohol and all that. He came round. . . .” Uncle Efim lighted his cold pipe.

“Where’s that sailor now? Is he alive?” Misha asked.

“Yes, he’s alive. Plying the Dnieper somewhere.”

“What about the man who took him off that mine?”

“That one’s alive, too. . . . Go to sleep and I’ll take a look at my buoys. The Kherson express is due.”

Uncle Efim walked away and the youngsters fell into a long silence, each thinking whether he would have done what that brave sailor did. They wanted to think they would, but did not venture to say so aloud as that would sound like empty bragging: it was easy to say you would, but try doing it. . . .

Timofey and Misha fell asleep without answering this question, but Kostya could not sleep. He imagined the grim choppy sea covered by a light mist, the sinister metal globe with horns dancing on the waves and the sailor snatching a doomed, frozen comrade from the jaws of death. . . .

“Kostya! Can you hear, Kostya?” he heard Nyura whispering. “You know, it was Daddy speaking about himself. It was he who took that sailor off the mine. Only he doesn’t like to talk about it. His friend, the one he took off the mine, came to see him—they thought I was sleeping, and talked about it, but I didn’t sleep and heard it all.”

Kostya opened his eyes and mouth wide in amazement.

“Uh-huh!” Nyura continued. “I heard everything! Only don’t ask him about it, because it’ll make him angry. The next morning I asked him but he told me I had dreamed it all, and not to bother him with silly things.”

“So that’s what he is like!” Kostya said with feeling.

"Oh! You don't know yet what he's like. He's like—" Nyura could not find the words and made an indefinite but very emotional gesture. "He found me, you know."

"How do you mean—found you?"

"Like this. When he returned home from the Navy, neither Mummy nor I was there. He searched everywhere, but couldn't find us. No one could tell him where Mummy and I had been evacuated to. We were put on an east-bound train, that was all he learned, but a lot of trains went in that direction. Daddy didn't know whether we were alive or perhaps killed by bombs, but he refused to think of us as gone. He began searching and it's simply awful how long it took him. Finally he found us. That is, he found the place where we had stopped—in Kustanay. Only Mummy—Mummy—she died," Nyura's voice broke. "And I wasn't there any longer either. I was put in an orphanage and it moved from one place to another. Daddy travelled all over Central Asia and found me! I remember that day, it was in 1946. And then he said: 'That's the end of that, my little girl. We're going home to live together.' And we came back here to live. That's why he got a job as buoy-keeper. He's a sailor, you know, and could easily have got a berth on a steamer or even on a ship on the sea, but he didn't want to leave me. 'What if I lose you again,' he said."

"What a wonderful Daddy you've got!"

"Uh-huh. Only I wish Mummy were alive! It's nice when you have a mother. . . ."

There was a note of deep sadness in Nyura's voice. Kostya did not find the words to comfort her and said nothing.

"You're lucky—you've got a mother! Tell me what's she like. Will you?"

"What do you mean by what's she like?" Kostya repeated in surprise. "She's just ordinary. Like other mothers—"

He shifted his position, trying to make his movements seem casual, and turned away from the fire for his face and even his ears were beginning to burn. He was surprised and ashamed he could find nothing to say about his mother, that he knew nothing about her.

He knew about Father though. He was killed in the war when Kostya was still a little boy and he knew where Captain Golovanov had served, the medals he wore and what he had received them for.

But Kostya never thought of Mother. He had been too engrossed in his own affairs to think of her. What was there to think about? When he woke up the breakfast was on the table—that was Mother. When he came from school, his dinner was already waiting for him. When he needed clean shirts, new shoes or a coat—they appeared, and this, of course, was also Mother. She did everything he needed and he did not have to think of anything. If he misbehaved, teased Lyolka, then Mother became angry and scolded him sternly. What more could he say?

Nyura, curled up into a ball, had fallen asleep long ago, but Kostya was still sniffing and tossing as he looked back and remembered. It turned out there was a lot that could be remembered.

He remembered himself vaguely as a very small boy when they were not living in Kiev but in Barnaul, where snowstorms and blizzards raged. In winter the snowstorms could knock a man off his feet and freeze him to death, while in summer the wind whistled over the rooftops of the city carrying sand and dust. No amount of muffling and hiding helped to keep it out—it got into everything: the furniture, the clothes and even crunched on the teeth. That winter Kostya had had no warm clothes and had been unable to go out-of-doors. Wrapping himself up in a blanket he would sit by the window waiting for Mother and watch the screaming wind drive and whirl the snow along the street. Mother would come home late in the evening, muffled up in all sorts of rags and wearing huge felt boots. These clothes made her look big, but when she took them off she was small and thin. Mother would light the stove, feed Kostya and if she did not have to return to the hospital they would sit down by the warm stove and talk a little.

Mother was a nurse and when she went on duty she would leave Kostya boiled potatoes, sometimes porridge and bread. They

had little bread and Mother would ask him not to eat it all at once. Kostya would promise, but the days were long and he would be lonely waiting for her and that made him even more hungry. Kostya would nibble at the bread and unnoticeably eat it all up. When Mother would return Kostya would be as hungry as the little dog belonging to the lady in whose cottage they lived. He would munch away at the food and only after he had finished would he remember and ask, "But Mother, haven't *you* any bread? Why are you eating only potatoes?"

"Never mind, Sonny," Mother would smile. "I don't want any. And then you have to grow, while I'm big and grown-up already."

Sometimes Kostya would wake up at night and see Mother sitting near the paraffin lamp, her shoulders heaving soundlessly. That was because they had not received any letters from Father for a long time and Mother was crying over the old ones. Kostya would make a noise purposely as he tossed about in his bed and Mother would turn off the lamp, lie down next to him, warming and comforting him so that he would doze off again at once.

When Father came on leave from the front, Kostya forgot all about Mother. He tried on Father's medals and shoulder-straps, asked him about the war and followed him about like a puppy. He remembered that on these occasions Mother was even more beautiful, and merrier than all of them. She skipped about and laughed like a little girl, ruffled Kostya's hair and sang all the time. Father followed her with happy eyes and laughed also.

But when Father was killed she again became like in Barnaul. Only paler and sadder. Kostya was six years old then and Lyolka a little baby in the cradle. In those days Maria Afanasyevna, their neighbour, would come and stand sorrowfully on their threshold, looking at Lyolka and Kostya with pitying eyes.

"You little orphans, you poor little orphans! What's going to happen to you now?" she would repeat over and over again.

One day this angered Mother and she said:

"I'll ask you not to pity my children, Maria Afanasyevna, they have a mother!"

At that time she was in her last year at the institute attending lectures every day. When they received the notification about Father's death, she went back to nursing, but did not give up her studies. She would come home late and sometimes, returning from school, Kostya would find nothing to eat and Mother sitting at the table, her eyes closed and her arms hanging helplessly at her sides. Kostya would throw his school-bag angrily on a chair and growl that here he was sweating away at school and could not get anything to eat on time.

"Don't be angry, Kostya darling," Mother would say in a tired voice. "I'll get something in a minute."

After dinner Kostya would run off and play with his friends and when he came back home he would find Mother either at her sewing or laundering. This always surprised Kostya and he wondered if Mother could not find anything more interesting to do than sewing or laundering.

Sometimes Mother would ask Kostya to play with Lyolka or sweep out the room. This made Kostya indignant and he would ask sarcastically, "Who'll do my home-work for me? Lyolka?"

Mother would silently do everything herself.

Kostya tossed about restlessly on the creaking raincoat, it was so hard that he could not make himself comfortable. He made all sorts of vows and promises and, tired out by shame and belated repentance, finally dropped off to sleep.

"What's Your Vocation?"

"Kostya! Get up, Kostya!" It was Nyura waking him up. "The boys went off fishing long ago. D'you always sleep so late?"

The first thing that came into Kostya's head was the evening's conversation. He did not feel like getting up and fishing. Without replying he turned over on his side.

"All right, do as you please," Nyura said. "I'll go and fish by myself then."

Kostya heard her get the rods together and walk away. Then he got up. Let her go! He did not want her to start yesterday's conversation again!

The sun was not up yet, but it was quite light already. Again there was a hazy mist over the river. Shivering in the chill coming up from the river, Kostya went to the tip of the island. The anglers were sitting on the bank of the Staritsa: the motionless Timofey, Misha, who kept moving about even though he was sitting, and Nyura.

A boat moved upstream along the glassy, still dark river. It was Uncle Efim finishing his morning rounds of the buoys.

"Uncle Efim," Kostya called out. "Take me with you!"

Uncle Efim brought the boat to the bank; Kostya jumped in and they went on. Uncle did not let Kostya row as his blisters had not healed yet, so Kostya took the steering oar and helped whenever he felt his help was needed. Both worked silently.

Kostya liked this calm masculine silence, he liked dipping the oar into the dark resilient water, hearing it gurgle under the oars, and looking at the wide smooth expanse of the river running to meet them.

They left the nodding red buoy on Devil's Tooth behind, intending to put it out on the return journey; the island floated by. They extinguished the white buoys, crossed to the other side, let the boat drift with the current and put out the red buoys one by one.

The anglers were waiting on the bank for their arrival. Nyura was hopping about, impatiently waving a sparkling string of fish she had caught. Misha was arguing with Timofey, who, in his usual unhurried manner, was taking fish off the stringer and throwing them into a pail.

Timofey and Misha took up the oars again while Nyura, choking over her words, breathlessly described the huge fish that had broken away from her hook. Timofey smiled good-naturedly, while Misha teased Nyura and said she had had no business trying to fish as she could not tell a chub from tadpole.

The boat reached the bank, and Timofey and Misha picked up their pails of fish and jumped ashore.

"Don't forget to come over, Kostya!" Misha said. "I'll show you our wireless centre."

"Uh-huh, do," Timofey confirmed, "we'll show you everything."

They started off but before they had taken many steps they stopped and shouted:

"Thank you, Uncle Efim! May we come another time?"

Kostya helped Uncle Efim pull the boat higher up the bank. After yesterday's conversation he wanted to do everything to please him. He was not looking for praise or trying to get into Uncle Efim's good books, simply he liked helping him or even just being near him.

Uncle Efim picked up all his lanterns and things and went to rest—he did not sleep at night—while Nyura started scrubbing the floor again, intending to bake something after that. Kostya was left to himself. He swam in the river, dived, but felt lonely, as it was no fun diving when nobody was watching.

Kostya sat on the stern of a boat floating near the bank, paddled his feet in the water and looked at the river. It was big, after all, he thought. In Kiev it seemed narrow and cramped, especially if you looked down at it from Vladimir Hill or May Day Garden. From mid-summer on, the river usually grew so shallow that the sandy strand of Trukhanov Island opposite stretched out almost to the Kiev bank, while the moorings there looked like long half-built bridges. Anglers, with their trousers rolled up to their knees, waded between the piers of the old Chain Bridge, and if Kostya had not been afraid of being scolded by Mother he could have easily swam across. Naturally, with Fyodor; he would not try it alone.

But here the river was wide and Kostya doubted if he could last to the other bank. The left bank seemed especially far and low when you looked at it from the level of the water. And it really was a long way off—it made you tired to row to it, even. And the current was strong, too. The murmuring stream kept forcing Kostya's feet gently to the surface while strands of river weed stretched out on the bed and trembled like fiddle-strings.

Kostya tried to grasp the fact that from the sparkling rippling surface to the dark river-bed, where the catfish lay in holes, twitching their barbels and puffing, and from this steep bank to the low flat left one this whole tight, solid body of water was moving. Moving every minute, every hour, winter and summer, year after year, without stopping for a second or drying up!

Before, Kostya had looked upon a river as a place where people went bathing and diving, took sunbaths, went out in rowboats and motor launches. The geography teacher said rivers meant "waterways" and "electricity", but these words never sank in, as he always saw before his mind's eye the sun-scorched sands of the beaches, the blinding reflection of the sun on the water and roaches flapping their tails at the end of a fishing line.

Now he saw the river in a different light. Its waters flowed in a smooth, calm stream and its serene majesty could not be disturbed no matter how the waves furrowed it or the steamers chopped it up with their paddle wheels and screws.

The steamers plying the river passed by constantly. There were all kinds. Big and small, smart white passenger boats, and grey tugs. Some raced up and down the river seemingly without any effort at all, others laboured along towing lines of heavy barges and rafts. Each time a steamer approached the island, coming downstream, it gave a loud warning blast of its siren, as if calling out: "Make way there, I'm c-o-o-m-ing!" Beyond the Ridge the river widened, opening a broad channel for them.

Nyura finished cooking the breakfast, woke her father and called Kostya.

"I'd like to go to Granny's, Daddy," Nyura said. "May I? I haven't seen her for ages! She can't come to our place, can she? She'd never manage the hill. But we'll run over and see her and then go to Misha's and Timofey's. I've cooked your dinner; you can warm it up when you're ready for it. All right?"

They walked across the meadow to Roaring Gully; the grasshoppers hopped out of their way in terror, columns of midges swarmed over their heads and the hoarse croaking of frogs reached them from somewhere in the reeds growing in the Staritsa. Nyura

"We're going," Nyura said, jumping up. "We have to go to Misha's and to Timka's too."

"Run along, dears, run along," Granny nodded. "Only look in on your way back and I'll treat you to some sour-cream."

The hot street seemed endless and finally Kostya felt he, too, would like to lie down in the shade of a fence, loll his tongue and pant wearily.

"We'll soon be there. . . . Here we are," Nyura said.

A little cottage with a tiled roof and wide-open windows stood in the shade of trees like all the other cottages in the village. On the door there was a notice with the stern warning: "Private. No Admittance."

"What shall we do?" Kostya asked in perplexity.

"Never mind—Wait!" Nyura said, and whistled shrilly.

A young man limped to the window; he had light, sun-bleached hair and was wearing a faded army tunic without shoulder-straps.

"Who's that whistling?" he asked, affecting a frown.

"It's me, Fyodor Pavlovich," Nyura smiled bashfully. "I'm calling Misha. Is he here? May we see your wireless station? I've seen it before, but he hasn't. He's my cousin. My aunt's son—Daddy's sister is his mother."

"Is he keen on wireless too?"

"No. We'd just like to have a look round and won't touch anything. Word of honour as a Young Pioneer!"

"You won't touch anything, eh?" Fyodor Pavlovich said narrowing his eyes. "Misha!" he called. "Some friends of yours to see you."

Misha came out on the porch and took them inside. He tried to walk slowly, speak unhurriedly, sedately, obviously imitating Fyodor Pavlovich, but not succeeding very well.

"Look," he said, "this is the receiving apparatus, and that's the amplifier. The wireless waves striking the antenna come here, are amplified and then—Nyura, take your hands off!—go out over the relay network. We have our own current, from the kolkhoz power station."

picked a bouquet of pale modest forget-me-nots, violet-blue wild peas and big white daisies with yellow eyes. The flowers gave off the cool smell of the river and the aroma of hay.

The wide grassy village street was deserted. In the middle, where the road had been ploughed up by cart wheels and hooves, some hens were bathing in the dust and throwing it up in clouds. Kostya watched them diving into the dust, looking about in a dazed way as they shook it off, then diving in again with a cackle. Dogs, their tongues lolling, lay panting with the heat in the shade of fences and cherry-trees. They looked up when Nyura and Kostya passed by, then closed their eyes again. Only one big dog growled lazily in a hoarse bass and wagged its tail, covered with last year's withered burs, as though it could not decide whether to get angry and bark properly or to welcome them. However, it was too hot to do either. Nyura and Kostya took no notice of it. It turned round several times on one spot and lay down again.

Granny's house stood deep in a large garden and was hidden by rose bushes, red and purple hollyhocks and snap-dragon.

They found Granny in her kitchen garden; she was a little old woman with a wrinkled face and pale eyes that at one time must have been as blue as Nyura's.

"Is it you, granddaughter?" she asked, her wrinkles racing in a happy smile, as though each were smiling on its own. "How nice of you to have come! Who's that you've brought with you? Oh, I know, he's Efim's sister's little boy. What a nice boy, too! Welcome, welcome! . . . Come into the house."

After the heat outdoors, the cottage was cool and dusky from the cherry-trees that shaded the windows.

"Sit down and have some milk. How are you and Daddy getting on?"

While the words chased one another out of Nyura's mouth, Granny placed some bread and a pot of milk on the table.

At first Kostya thought he would just taste the milk out of politeness, but then he poured himself some more and drank until he could hear it gurgling in his stomach. He liked the small cool house and Nyura's kind, quiet Granny.

The room was lined with iron lockers of all sizes, painted light grey. On them were all sorts of handles and push-buttons. Like Nyura, Kostya wanted to touch them but he kept control of himself. If Misha had been there on his own, he might have, but there was that Fyodor Pavlovich, sitting in a chair with his left leg stretched out—must be an artificial one, Kostya thought—and poking a screw-driver into some intricate gadget bristling with pieces of coloured wire. On the table in front of him there was a box with a loudspeaker that had whispering voices and snatches of music coming out of it.

"Before, we only relayed Moscow and Kiev, but now we have a studio and can broadcast our own programmes; lectures, amateur concerts and all. . . . And the kolkhoz chairman and team leaders can give their orders direct by wireless. Before this when anything had to be found out they had to run to the cottages, but now you can speak into the microphone and get in touch with anyone. For instance, you can say: 'Yakov Lukich, how's your spring wheat getting on? Have to be getting a move on, you know! What's that? Reaper's broken down? Wait a minute. . . . Calling the smithy. Kuzma Stepanovich! That you? Here's a rush order. Go down and see what's wrong with Lukich's reaper. . . .' Handy, isn't it?"

"Yes!" Kostya agreed. "But what's your job here?"

"I'm on duty. Helping Fyodor Pavlovich. I do a repair job where it's needed. I know how to do everything!"

"Misha, don't swank," Fyodor Pavlovich said without raising his head.

"Oh, all right! How long are you going to be in Polyanskaya Greblya? That's not enough. . . . I could have taught you. We have a wireless study-group, fifteen members. We get radio instruction and the best are—"

"Misha—" Fyodor Pavlovich warned.

"All right, Fyodor Pavlovich. Well, those that show they understand wireless best go on duty here. There are four of us and we take turns at duty. Are you in any study-group?"

"No. We have a wireless set at home though. A *Rekord*."

"A *Rekord!* Why, you can't call that a set. Now a *Radiotekhnika*, that's the real thing! Have you ever been in a wireless station?"

"You're not allowed to, are you?"

"They won't let you if you're alone, but on an excursion you can. Isn't that right, Fyodor Pavlovich? Oh, if I were in your place! . . ." Misha's face and his whole mobile body expressed such enthusiasm that it was clear without words how much he would have done if he lived in Kiev.

"Kiev's signed off, switch on Moscow," Fyodor Pavlovich said.

"Right away!"

Misha flew to the panel of the first locker, moved some levers and started twisting small black notched knobs. A deafening bass came from the loudspeaker, then it stopped with a gasp and was followed by an orchestra that thundered and rattled and made a noise like somebody sawing wood at break-neck speed.

"American jazz," Misha laughed, turning round.

The sawing noise faded out and was replaced by the calm voice of the Moscow announcer.

"It's time we were going," Nyura said.

Kostya liked it here and did not want to go without finding out the purpose of all those levers, valves and handles, but he was shy of the taciturn Fyodor Pavlovich, who was busy with that thing with wires.

They took leave of him and went away. Misha saw them out of the cottage.

"Come again," he said, "and I'll teach you everything. Want me to? How are you in physics? . . . Well, it'll be easy as pie. I'll teach you in no time!"

"Don't swank, Misha!" Nyura said, imitating Fyodor Pavlovich, and burst out laughing.

"I'm not swanking but only—Go on, you try it! As for Fyodor Pavlovich, Kostya, don't be afraid of him, he's nice."

"Oh yes, very nice, only he doesn't like swanks!" Nyura put in, but Misha ignored her.

"Did you see? He's got an artificial left leg. Made it himself. Better than anything factory-made. He's got lots of medals, you

know! Where're you going? To Timka's? To see his watermelons and turnips?"

They found Timofey in a big shady garden behind the two-storey stone school building. He was walking unhurriedly from tree to tree, carefully bending the branches and looking at the fluffy unripe fruit.

"Hello, Timka!" Nyura shouted. "It's us. Hello!"

"Hello!" Timofey smiled and immediately became serious again. "Only don't go climbing the trees or plucking anything."

"As if we'd want to!" Nyura said in an offended voice.

"Whether you want to or not I'm warning you. Otherwise I won't let you come again."

"Where are your watermelons?" Kostya asked.

"That's not the only thing I go in for. I go in for pears as well. I've got a triennial programme in pears."

"A what?"

"Well, a three-year plan, if you like. Understand? Who looked after the orchards during the war? No one did. How many trees the Germans cut down? And you know what cold winters we had later on! People froze to death, to say nothing of trees. Well, pear-trees are delicate, they like warmth. So trees like the *Beurrés* and *Duchesses* and others got frozen. We've got to plant new trees, don't you think? But what kind of trees? *Beurrés* and *Duchesses* again? If we have another severe winter they'll all perish again. But there were local kinds that survived in the villages, in the kolkhoz orchards and in people's gardens. That means we've got to find those varieties, cultivate them and spread them."

"D'you mean you're going to travel all over the Ukraine?"

"Why should I? D'you think I'm the only one doing this? You know how many there are of us Young Michurinists? I'll show you letters from friends living almost in every region. Pen-friends, I mean. We exchange seeds and share know-how. As soon as we get to my place I'll show you. One pen-friend from Kirovograd sent me some seeds, and the tree's this size now."

Timofey showed Kostya all kinds of saplings, named the varieties, told where he got the seeds from and described how he tended

and grew them. Kostya was not very interested: all trees were the same to him, the only difference being that some were bigger than others. But he listened patiently and marvelled at Timofey. Timofey was different here from what he had been on the river. Although his movements were still unhurried, you could not call him sleepy or lazy. He walked from sapling to sapling with a purposeful, businesslike air and spoke competently of things Kostya had never heard about, and hardly used the word "well".

"Just a second," Timofey said, coming to a sudden halt. "Where's Nyura? Just wait and see what I'll do to her!"

But Nyura was walking towards them and doing her best to show she was admiring the tops of the trees—or was it the pearly clouds floating overhead?

"Where've you been?" Timofey asked suspiciously.

"Walking about, looking around," Nyura said, shrugging her shoulders. "Tell me that's forbidden, too? Let's go away from here, Kostya!"

"No. Stop! Stick out your tongue."

"Anything else you want? What for?"

"Do as I tell you! Well?"

"Oh, all right! There!" Nyura exclaimed, putting out her tongue with its tell-tale cherry juice stains. "Grudging me two little cherries! Why, the sparrows have pecked more than that."

"They're sparrows. You're not a sparrow, you're a Young Pioneer."

"And you're a meany!"

"What are you two quarrelling about?" a deep-toned voice asked.

On the path beside them stood a young woman in a flowered print frock. She was watching them with laughing grey eyes.

"Let her tell you herself," Timofey snapped.

"I will, too," Nyura said cheerlessly. "I wanted to taste the cherries very much, Elena Ivanovna. I picked only two, and Timka's already yelling his head off. See how many the sparrows pecked, and he grudged me two teeny ones!"

"He didn't grudge you anything, of course. They shouldn't be picked before they're ripe, that's all. You won't pick any more, will you? There's a good girl. Who's this?" Elena Ivanovna asked, turning to Kostya.

"Kostya."

"Another Young Michurinist?"

"N-no."

"Who then? A Young Naturalist, or a Young Technician?"

"No. I'm not anything."

"I see," Elena Ivanovna smiled and turned to Timofey.

They bent over a sickly pippin sapling and discussed what had to be done with it. Elena Ivanovna suggested replacing it, but Timofey, his head bent stubbornly, insisted that that was unnecessary, that he would tend to it himself and it would make good yet.

"Very well!" Elena Ivanovna said. "That'll be your responsibility."

"All right," Timofey replied with calm assurance.

"Good-bye, children! Good-bye, Kostya I'm-Not-Anything!" Elena Ivanovna smiled again and walked away.

"Come on," Timofey said. "Now I'll show you my watermelons."

"No! I'm going home!" Kostya replied, flaring up suddenly.

"All right then, another time."

"There won't be another time. You can keep your pippins and watermelons!"

He wheeled about and made a bee-line for the garden gate. Nyura ran after him, while Timofey watched them with a puzzled expression, then bent over the weak sapling again.

Kostya dug his heels into the warm velvety dust on the road and looked for something to take his anger out on, but did not find even a stone to throw at a dog. Nyura walked behind him, keeping silent. Only when the village was left behind, and they approached Roaring Gully, Kostya saw a pile of clods and began flinging them angrily over the side. His anger gradually subsided, but left an unpleasant aftertaste.

"I don't care!" he muttered, flinging the last clod. "See if I do!"

"What's the matter, Kostya?" Nyura asked anxiously. "Who are you angry with? Timka?"

"No one! Come on home."

They ran down into the gully and climbed to the meadow. The grasshoppers jumped out from under their feet again and columns of midges swarmed over their heads, but the happy mood did not return to Kostya. The grasshoppers and midges annoyed him; he felt like choking all the frogs so they would never squeak again.

"Why should I be anybody?" he asked, turning suddenly on Nyura. "I will if I want to and won't if I don't!"

"Did I say you had to?" Nyura asked in bewilderment.

But Kostya paid no attention.

Why did he *have* to be a Michurinist? He wanted to be a sailor and not a Michurinist!

"No one's forcing you, you know."

"Then why did she laugh?"

"Who?"

"Well, that teacher of yours."

"She's a teacher and senior Young Pioneer leader at the same time."

"I don't care! And Misha and Timka . . . what are they swanking about?"

"But they didn't say anything!"

"All right, they didn't, but all the same they keep swanking about things they know and I don't—I don't care! I know I can do a lot of things they can't."

Kostya actually knew and could do many things, and was secretly proud of it. He knew all the well-known film stars, nearly all the famous athletes by name and many of them by sight; he could recognise all the players of the Kiev Dynamo football team by the way they walked; no one could explain so well why the left wing muffled a shot and how the team captain made rings around his opponent; he knew the names of all Soviet and foreign automobile models; he made his own aquarium and if the fish died there it was the fault of the chlorinated tap-water, not his; when he col-

lected stamps, his collection was so good that chaps in form 9 offered to swop with him. He was the strongest crawl-stroke swimmer in Form 5, while his swallow-dive was second only to Fyodor's.

Kostya was sure he knew and could do more than all the boys like Misha and Timka put together, but somehow that thought did not comfort him. Finally, he guessed the reason, which was that Misha and Timka were doing the same things as grown-ups while he was not. Not completely like grown-ups, but still it was part of the same job.

"They're being forced to do it, that's why!" he said aloud.

"Who? Timka and the Gipsy?" Nyura guessed. "Just try forcing them to do anything! No one's forcing them, they like it and that's why they're helping. But why are you angry? No one's forcing you, you know."

Of course, no one was forcing him. He had often been invited to join one study-group or another, but he had turned down the idea because he thought study-groups were like lessons: the members had a time-table to keep and were given home-work. In the end, it turned out that nearly all the boys were busy with something they were interested in, while he was left at a loose end. In the Zoo he saw a boy who must have been a Young Naturalist doing something with a bear cub. And Sergei Kazantsev attended meetings at the House of Young Technicians and was building his own steam engine. School No. 25 had a Young Historians' Society that went out on expeditions every summer. Kostya thought of joining that society to be able to go on its expeditions, but was put off by the rule that you had to write a historical paper, a thing Kostya did not want to do.

Kostya had had many hobbies. When he heard of someone with a new hobby, he took it up eagerly, but grew tired of it very soon and gave it up for the sake of some new hobby, only to drop it without any regrets for a third. He would grow awfully enthusiastic about something, but his enthusiasm would never last long, always disappearing without a trace. "That's not my vocation," he would decide to himself and that would put an end to it.

What *was* his vocation anyway? What did vocation mean? Where would it come from? When?

These questions flitted through his mind and he lay on the bank till evening refusing to speak to Nyura as he pondered what his vocation might be. But these questions remained unanswered by supper time and even by the time he went to bed.

In the morning Kostya's gloomy thoughts were washed away by the cool, transparent water and the blinding sun; he became himself again, bathed in the sun, swam, tried to reach the nest of a sand-martin, but only skinned his knees against the steep slope for his pains. Misha and Timofey joined him and together they built a raft out of driftwood in a shallow sandy backwater. The bloated logs floated by themselves, but sank under the weight of the brave seafarers.

The days raced by. Kostya went out in the boat with his friends and sometimes rowed by himself for short distances. He rowed well now and one day was surprised to find that instead of a flabby skin he had a tight, if still rather small, knot of muscle on his arms. He glanced occasionally into Nyura's mirror and saw his peeling nose, his bleached brows that looked like last year's grass, and tried to decide whether his tan was likely to be darker than Fyodor's.

The four children became such close friends that it made Kostya feel sad to think he would have to part from the other three one day. What a good thing if they all lived in Kiev! With his trusty friend Fyodor added to them it would be impossible to find a better team anywhere.

Everything would have been fine if every now and then, when they were in the middle of some game, Misha did not run off to go on duty at the wireless centre and Timofey to his saplings and Nyura remember suddenly that she had to finish some cooking and attend to various household chores. Every time that happened, Kostya was left alone and his mood spoiled. They all had something they were interested in to occupy them, only he had nothing to do except swim and sunbathe. At these times he would be overcome by the uncomfortable feeling that he was Kostya I'm-Not-

Anything and that till now he had not found his vocation. The time when he would be a sailor was still far off, while at the present he could not fit himself in with anything.

Special Task

The boys kept inviting Kostya to visit them, but it was a long time before he could make up his mind to go; the unpleasant feeling that everyone was doing something useful and he was not was still fresh in his mind. Gradually the memory wore off and one afternoon he agreed to go with Nyura to see Granny again. But there were some adventures on the way.

A red-haired boy sped past them like a bullet just as they entered the village. When he was already quite far ahead he suddenly stopped, waved his hand at them and shouted:

"Why are you going so slow? Hurry up!" and ran off again.

"What's the matter with him?" Kostya asked.

"Don't know. That's Senya Zhurilo. I wonder if something's happened? Let's run."

"Let's."

Sending up clouds of dust and frightening the wildly clucking hens, they ran down the street till Misha stopped them.

"What's the hurry? There's plenty of time."

"Lots of time for what?"

"To get to the school. You're going there, aren't you?"

"We don't really know. Senya shouted we should hurry, and so we ran."

"Fancy that! Running like mad without knowing why," Misha smiled derisively. "I see I have to set you up with a loudspeaker."

"Misha, stop swanking," Nyura said in the manner of Fyodor Pavlovich.

"I'm not swanking, but you ought to listen to the wireless sometimes. I made the announcement myself."

"What announcement?"

Misha stopped, pulled a serious face and, looking past them, solemnly chanted: "This is the Village Wireless Centre calling. All Young Pioneers of the Sasha Chekalin Detachment are to report at the school at 6 p.m. today for a special task.' That's what! Understand?"

"No, I don't," Kostya said. "What task?"

"You're a fine one! Who's going to give a special task away? It's like a military secret, you know!"

That was enough to silence Kostya, but Nyura came to his rescue.

"Oh, Misha, you're sticking your nose into the air again! Probably you don't know anything yourself and are going there to find out. I bet you don't know anything! Right?"

"It's my business if I know anything or not," Misha protested importantly, but stopped arguing.

Although they arrived at the school long before six o'clock there were many girls and boys there. Misha promptly disappeared somewhere, Nyura went off "for a minute" to talk with her girl-friends and Kostya was left to himself. Boys and girls he did not know stole curious glances at him, but as soon as he turned round they pretended he did not interest them at all. But these glances made him very uncomfortable, and he felt as though his back were wooden and his arms and legs did not belong to him. When Timofey appeared he ran to him as joyfully as if they had last met years ago instead of only the day before.

Behind Timofey came a pudgy little fellow of about five; looking like a miniature Timofey, he unhurriedly followed on his heels and kept twisting his head to see everything and everybody around him. His trousers were suspended by straps of narrow ribbon pulled over the shoulder on top of his shirt and fastened in front by a huge mother-of-pearl button. The little boy held the straps with both hands either because he did not depend on them or because he was afraid of losing his unusual button.

"Your kid brother?" Kostya asked.

"Uh-huh. Tailed along, worse luck! Listen you, tail, either stop lagging or I'll send you back home!"

The little boy approached them leisurely and stared at Kostya with wide-open eyes.

"What's your name?" Kostya asked.

The boy was silent for a long time, continuing to stare, then puffed his cheeks, goggled his eyes and forced himself to say: "Yegorka."

"Hello, Yegorka! Why did you come here? Do you want to be a Young Pioneer? Yes?" Nyura asked, running up and tickling him.

Yegorka was ticklish, and he giggled and kicked: "Uh-huh! Lemme go! Don't tickle."

"Detachment, fall in!" ordered a shortish boy with a bulging forehead.

Nyura and Timofey ran off, leaving Kostya and Yegorka to themselves.

"Atten-shun!"

Elena Ivanovna and a tall thin man with close-set eyes hidden deep in their sockets came out of the school building. The man was young, but his bushy moustache gave him a middle-aged look. On hearing the command he drew himself up and marched up smartly, like a soldier. The boy with the bulging forehead took a few steps towards them and threw up his hand in a salute.

"The Sasha Chekalin Detachment is present in good order. Three members failed to turn up. No reasons have been given!"

"Right!" Elena Ivanovna said, returning the salute. "Detachment ready!"

"Always ready!" the children shouted all together.

"Stand at ease," Elena Ivanovna said quietly. "I'm glad you turned out so punctually. The kolkhoz has asked us to help them. For us that's an honourable task, indeed it's a duty! We shall not, of course, refuse, shall we?"

"Of course not! We'll help! Always ready!" the Young Pioneers chorused.

"Ivan Kuzmich, who is a team leader at the kolkhoz, will now tell us what they want us to do."

Ivan Kuzmich straightened his faded tunic and scrutinised the detachment.

"It's this way, boys and girls," he began. "As you know, this is the busiest time of the year and we can't spare anyone from the fields. Well, the pigs and other livestock," he smiled into his moustache, "are poking about everywhere and looking for something tasty. Folks are complaining about it and saying the fences ought to be mended. They're right, of course: the fences ought to be mended. What's more, the drying-shed needs repairing. But before we can start repairing it we need osier twigs. They grow on the island on the Staritsa and if we sent two or three collective farmers for them we would have to take them off their jobs. I think cutting twigs is a job you can easily handle, and we'll see to their delivery to the kolkhoz. That's how the matter stands. What do you say?"

The detachment replied with enthusiastic cries.

"Of course! Hooray! To the island! We'll go right away if you want!"

Kostya smarted with envy.

The boy with the bulging forehead frowned: "Silence!" he cried.

"So, boys and girls," Elena Ivanovna said when the detachment fell silent, "we'll assemble at noon tomorrow. The detachment council will remain behind after you're dismissed and we'll assign the duties, who's to do what and so on. Any questions?"

"Elena Ivanovna," Nyura's voice rang out. "May we take our Kostya along? He's also a Young Pioneer, though he doesn't belong to our detachment."

Elena Ivanovna turned around, recognised Kostya, smiled and nodded to him: "Of course you may! Anyone wishing to may come."

Kostya flushed with pleasure. Good girl, Nyura! And Elena Ivanovna turned out to be a good sort, too. . . . Yegorka puffed and panted beside him.

"What's wrong with you?" Kostya asked, bending over to him, but he only opened his eyes wider and did not answer.

The detachment fell out, Misha and Timofey came up to Kostya, and a minute later they were joined by Nyura who had stopped to speak about something with Elena Ivanovna. Kostya and Nyura went to Granny's and then home.

On the way Nyura told Kostya that she had asked Elena Ivanovna for permission to join the detachment at her father's cottage; that would save them a walk to the village and back, as anyway the detachment had to come to the cottage before crossing over to the island.

In the morning, Nyura went about cooking and Kostya was free to do as he liked. He took a walk in the meadow, caught crickets and grasshoppers, thinking to present the best ones to the school for their collection and to take the rest home to Lyolka who liked to play with them.

In the distance Kostya noticed a small figure going over the top of the opposite slope of Roaring Gully, and rolling down quickly. He waited for the figure to appear on this side, wondering who could be coming to see them so early—but no one came. So he ran up to the side of the gully and, looking down, saw Yegorka floundering at the bottom. The steps cut into the side by the water were almost as high as Yegorka himself and he was having a hard time climbing them.

To bring himself over each step Yegorka heaped it with clay, struggled to the top of the heap from where he brought his stomach over the next step and pulled up his legs. He had been repeating this process before Kostya saw him, and now he was already perspiring and was smeared with clay from head to foot; but he doggedly went on climbing.

"Where're you going, Yegorka? Here, I'll give you a hand!" Kostya shouted.

Yegorka raised his head, panted and puffed as he looked at Kostya, but did not reply at once.

"I'll climb by myself," he said finally, and set to work again.

Kostya lay down on the ground and watched him.

Yegorka grew tired, the clods of clay fell apart and crumbled under his feet and he had to look for new ones. On top of everything, his shining mother-of-pearl button tore off and rolled to the bottom, and his trousers, their own support gone, began slipping down.

"Hey, you'll lose your pants!" Kostya laughed.

Yegorka did not reply. Holding up his trousers, he crawled down for the button. But he had nowhere to put it; there were no pockets in his trousers and he could not hold it in his hand because that made it hard for him to climb. He thought for a while and then put the button in his mouth and started climbing up again.

"It'll take you till evening that way. Wait a minute," Kostya said. He ran down and helped Yegorka up step by step.

When they reached the top Yegorka took the button out of his mouth and said with an air of independence, "It was the button. Without that I'd have—"

"But where are you going?"

"Got business," he replied curtly and made for the buoy-keeper's cottage.

"Yegorka!" Nyura exclaimed, throwing up her hands in surprise. "What are *you* doing here? And what a mess you're in! Where's your button?"

"Here," Yegorka said, opening his fist and holding up his trousers with his other hand.

"Come on now, off with your clothes!" Nyura ordered. "Go and wash while I sew the button on."

Yegorka slipped out of his clothes obediently—he had more confidence in Nyura than in Kostya—and went to wash, while Nyura dusted his clothes and sewed on the button.

"He's trying to tag on to us. Oh, won't Timka give it to him when he sees him! You want to come with us, do you?" Nyura asked.

"Uh-huh," Yegorka replied without turning round.

"They won't take you, you're too little."

"I'll go anyway!" Yegorka said stubbornly, puffing out his cheeks.

"All right, don't puff. Come along, we'll have to go soon."

Yegorka followed Nyura dutifully and ate everything she set before him. He looked round with slow attention and listened to everything the others said, his mind working away furiously all the time. When he tried to work out or grasp something that interested him, he stopped eating or even breathing as though afraid

the thought might elude him. If he was asked anything in those moments, he stared and queried, "Er—who?"

Kostya and Nyura laughed; they liked Yegorka, as did Uncle Efim.

"He's an independent young lad," he said with a smile.

A bugle sounded near Roaring Gully, followed by the roll of a drum. Nyura and Kostya ran out to meet the detachment.

The boy with the bulging forehead marched in front, carrying a flag in his outstretched hands.

"That's Mitya Dimko, the chairman of our Detachment Council. He's terribly clever! The best speaker we have!" Nyura informed Kostya. "Good morning, Elena Ivanovna! May we fall in?"

They took their places at the tail of the column.

Near the cottage the Young Pioneers were met by Uncle Efim. Nyura had told him of the special task, but he already knew about it: he had been in the village the day before and the kolkhoz chairman had asked him to keep an eye on the children while they were working, and to ferry them over to the island and bring back the osier twigs.

"Good morning!" Elena Ivanovna greeted Uncle Efim. "You'll help us cross to the island, won't you?"

"Good morning. Of course I'll help you. You'd have a hard time if you went by yourself with this crew."

The column fell out, and Nyura ran to Timofey.

"Guess who came to us this morning? Your Yegorka."

"You don't say!" Timofey exclaimed in alarm, coming to a sudden standstill.

"Uh-huh. Said he's coming along with us—"

"I'll 'coming along' him!"

"Where's Yegorka, Daddy?"

"He was here just now."

Timofey, Nyura and finally almost the whole detachment began looking for Yegorka, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Why are we wasting time looking for him?" Mitya Dimko said reasonably. "He probably got scared that he'd catch it and ran home."

"I'd like to see *him* getting scared, the little pest!" Timofey drawled sceptically.

They did not find Yegorka, and Elena Ivanovna ordered the detachment to the two boats that were ready for them. The older boys took the oars in the smaller boat and Elena Ivanovna got in with them, while Uncle Efim went to the bigger one which was filled with giggling and chattering girls. One of them went to the bow, but as soon as she sat down on the long, wide thwart and put her feet on a pile of marshweed, she jumped up shrieking, "Whose are those legs? Oh, help!"

There was general confusion, but Timofey guessed at once what had happened. He pushed the girls aside, ran to the bow and dragged Yegorka out from under the thwart by his feet. The little lad resisted, clutching at the oars and the thwart, but Timofey pried his fingers loose in grim silence and dragged him to the bank.

At first everyone laughed, but Yegorka's face expressed such desperate misery and he looked from one to another with such pitiful pleading in his eyes and was obviously on the verge of setting up such a deafening howl, that everybody felt sorry for him.

"Perhaps we can take him with us after all, Elena Ivanovna?" Nyura asked hesitantly. "We'll look after him. Won't we, girls?"

"Yes, yes! We'll look after him!" the girls cried out in unison. "Please let's take him, Elena Ivanovna!"

Elena Ivanovna looked questioningly at Timofey and Uncle Efim.

"Well, if you like." Uncle Efim smiled. "He's an inquisitive youngster and he'll enjoy the trip."

"I'll give him something he'll enjoy! He's to go home at once!" Timofey said angrily.

Yegorka's lips stretched into the beginning of a wail. Turning to Elena Ivanovna he just managed to blurt out: "You said yourself—'anyone wishing'—and I'm one of those—"

"Here's what we'll do," Elena Ivanovna decided. "Come and sit with me and on the island you're not to take a single step away from me! Is that understood?"

"Ye-es," Yegorka said with a sob, and quickly scrambled into the boat.

He calmed down at once and, turning his head from side to side, watched the Young Pioneers taking their places, Uncle Efim pushing off, Kostya rowing. But he did not look at his brother who was rowing next to Kostya.

The boat drew away from the bank to the middle of the sparkling river and Yegorka's heart sank. Slowly he shifted down from the thwart and sat on the bottom—here, with the water out of sight, it was not so frightening.

"Are you frightened?" Elena Ivanovna asked.

Yegorka sniffed, looked about himself, examined the grating on the floorboards but did not reply. Then, seeing that nothing was happening and everyone was sitting quietly, he crawled back to the seat, trying to keep as close to Elena Ivanovna as possible. This was the first time he was crossing the Dnieper and curiosity overcame fear. Everything round him was interesting.

Twigs and blades of grass floated on the river, and Yegorka was curious to know how they got there and where they were floating to. The water was not flowing quietly, but whirling in circles as though about to boil and something dirty-yellow showed up from the bottom.

"What's that?" Yegorka asked.

"Sand," someone told him.

Yegorka thought this over for a long time. Sand lay on the bottom of the river, then how and why was it rising to the surface? Perhaps they were laughing at him, and fooling him? But no one was laughing, there was Elena Ivanovna sitting beside him, she was a grown-up and the boys would be afraid to fool him in front of her. All the same, sand was not alive, and if you threw it into the water it sank at once; Yegorka was sure of that—he had often thrown handfuls of it into the river and it always went straight to the bottom. Yegorka puzzled so hard over this insoluble riddle that he stopped breathing and flushed.

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"Er—who?"

Everybody laughed, but Yegorka paid no attention. He pointed to a whirlpool, yellow with sand.

"Why's that?"

"You mean the sand? The current picks it up and throws it up to the surface."

Yegorka squinted doubtfully, then glanced at Elena Ivanovna, but she was silent. That meant it was true. He understood now why he sank when he paddled about in the village duck-pond; there was no current there and so he went straight down to the bottom. But it seemed the thing to do was to go where it was deep and the current fast. Perhaps at first he would sink to the bottom but then the current would carry him to the surface on its own. But what if it did not? Everyone said he was fat and heavy. And then the other fellows, they swam even in the duck-pond. No, there was something wrong here; perhaps he was being fooled after all. And Yegorka pondered over this.

"Look, a snake! There's a snake in the water!" the girls in the big boat screamed.

Everyone turned round to look and the boat lurched to one side.

"Sit still," Elena Ivanovna said sternly.

They sat straight again, but craned their necks to look into the water. A little head moved towards them from the big boat, cutting through the scattering of sunbeams and parting the water in tiny waves, like whiskers.

"Silly girls!" cried out the keen-eyed Timofey. "It's not a snake, it's an eel!"

He took his oar out of the rowlock and, when the eel came close, slipped the oar under it and deftly lifted it out into the air. Glittering in the bright sunlight, the eel writhed convulsively, wriggled off the oar and disappeared under the boat. The boys were eager to continue the hunt, but Elena Ivanovna would have none of it. They gazed after the eel regretfully, while Kostya and Timofey resumed their rowing.

At last they reached the island. Everybody jumped out of the boats and started romping and racing along the hot sand. Only

Mitya Dimko remained serious. He solemnly carried the flag out of the boat and, planting the pole into the sand, cried, "Silence!"

"Let's not waste any time," Elena Ivanovna said, "there's lots of work to be done. We'll arrange it as we said yesterday: the boys will cut the bushes and the girls will carry the osier here to the boats. The good rowers will help Efim Kondratyevich take it across."

"Cutters, pick up your axes and follow me!" Mitya ordered.

"Carriers, follow me!" cried a fair-haired girl with big eyes that had a startled look in them.

Kostya knew that this was the Galya Zdravstvuy he had heard about from Nyura.

The girls gathered round Galya, while Kostya and the other boys took the axes out of the boat and went over to Mitya. Timofey, Misha and Boris, a lanky silent boy, remained near the boats to help Uncle Efim with the rowing.

"Only look here, cutters," Uncle Efim warned them. "Don't cut away whole bushes. Cut the long thin branches. And be careful with the axes, don't chop your feet off."

"Right," returned Mitya smartly. "Follow me."

Shouldering their axes like regular lumbermen, the boys ran to the bushes and soon the light thud of their blows against the wet osier branches came from all parts of the island. The girls followed the boys and gathered the branches they chopped off. Elena Ivanovna showed them how to tie the thin, pliant rods into bundles.

Yegorka dogged Elena Ivanovna's heels, diligently helping to gather the branches and casting envious glances at the boys swinging the axes.

Kostya hacked away furiously at the undergrowth and watched to see if Mitya, working nearby, was outpacing him. Mitya chopped calmly, unhurriedly, but moved very rapidly forward and it was not easy to keep up with him. Red-haired Senya Zhurilo worked on Kostya's left. He was the detachment's bugler and the bugle, polished to a dazzling shine, dangled at his back.

"It's like being in a jungle, isn't it?" Kostya said to Mitya. "Like hacking a road through liana tangles."

"Call this osier a jungle?" Mitya asked ironically. "You've certainly got an imagination! You keep your mind on your chopping and don't break the line!"

Kostya's liking for Mitya promptly faded. He had no imagination at all! Perhaps he was clever, Kostya granted him that, but he certainly was a dry sort. He paid no more attention to Mitya, as chopping was interesting work even when you did it alone. He remembered Arsenyev's *Ders i Uzala*, which he had read just before he left Kiev, and fancied himself now as the intrepid Arsenyev cutting his way through the virgin thickets of Sikhotealin, now as his guide. He could not yet decide which was better, as he liked both of them equally well.

"The boats are full, and have cast off," shouted Nyura who ran up from the bank.

"Senya, blow the signal for a break," Elena Ivanovna said.

Senya took the bugle, put the mouthpiece to his lips and raised the end skyward. The ringing notes of the brass bugle floated across the river.

Kostya was not tired yet. He was only just getting down to real work, but he obeyed the summons and followed the others to a clearing where Elena Ivanovna was. The boys and girls discussed how much more had to be cut, but Kostya lay down and watched Yegorka.

During his wanderings, the little boy had found a hole under a bush and was now lying on his stomach trying to peer into it. It was dark there and Yegorka could see nothing; at first he put his hand into the hole, then picked up a twig and started poking about with it.

Kostya watched him and tried to remember who he looked like. Lyolka, of course! They were quite different yet really very much alike. Lyolka was always bothering him, trying to follow him everywhere, copied him in everything, but Kostya always pinched her and chased her away. That hurt her feelings and sometimes she even cried, but forgot quickly and stuck to him again. Natur-

ally, like Yegorka she was interested in everything the older people did, and wanted to do the same, Kostya thought indulgently; she was still a little girl. And he never paid any attention to her, like Timofey with Yegorka. A shame, of course, when you came to think of it!

Lyolka was far away but his remorse and burst of generosity gave him no rest now. He rose and, approaching Elena Ivanovna, asked: "May I show Yegorka round the island?"

"You may, but see you don't go near the water!"

"I'm not a baby, I understand. Come with me, Yegorka!"

The little boy jumped up eagerly and ran to Kostya. Passing the bushes the boys had been chopping, they went deep into the island. They walked slowly as Yegorka stopped every now and then to inspect a caterpillar crawling along a branch, a butterfly with wings folded like sails, or a torn boot that had somehow landed on the island.

Something greenish-brown stirred in a small sunlit clearing. Kostya rushed towards it and found it to be a tortoise. A small one, but it was alive! What a grand thing to take back to Kiev! The tortoise tried to escape, but Kostya picked it up by its shell; it drew in its head and feet. Yegorka panted with excitement as he squatted next to Kostya.

"What's that you've caught?"

"A tortoise! A live one! See, I'll turn it on its back and it won't be able to go away."

Kostya turned it over and put it on the ground. For some time it lay without moving. Then it cautiously stuck its head and legs out and tried to put them on the ground.

"Here, behave yourself!" Kostya said, tapping its shell with his finger. In went its head and legs again. "Hey, everybody! Come here quick!" Kostya shouted.

The boys and girls plunged through the undergrowth and surrounded Kostya's find. The girls shrieked with delight, but the boys were not inclined to give vent to such feelings, saying they had seen bigger tortoises in their time. Yegorka squatted over it in a complete trance, then raised his head and resolutely said:

"It's not true!"

"What isn't true," the boys asked, laughing.

"Sasha said 'I'll cripple you like God crippled the tortoise.' And it's not crippled at all. It's quite ordinary. Got arms and legs and all."

After this long speech he bent over the tortoise and went into a trance again, disregarding the laughter.

"That'll do! Time to get back to work," Mitya said, "we're wasting time with this tortoise. Look, the boats are on the way back."

Senya Zhurilo blew his bugle again, the axes began ringing softly and the girls ran to the boats with bundles of osier. The cutters worked their way further into the island, but Yegorka refused to go and Kostya succeeded in moving him only by taking the tortoise to a new place. Seizing a moment when the helpless tortoise stuck out its legs, Kostya tied a bit of string to one of them. Yegorka held the string fast in his hand and lost his fear that the tortoise would get away.

Three times more Senya blew his bugle, three times more the boats left and returned, and finally Uncle Efim passed the word through Nyura that enough had been cut to load a lorry and that it was time to be going back. The sun was now well over to the west and would be setting in two or three hours. The children gathered on the bank and watched the fully laden boats make their last trip to the mainland and return. No one felt like talking, they were all tired, but Mitya made a short announcement, saying he thought they had worked quite well, nobody had shirked or loafed and that although Kostya did not belong to their detachment he had worked as well as the best cutters. Although Kostya had made up his mind once and for ever that Mitya was a dry dull sort without any imagination, but he was pleased to hear himself being praised.

They sat down in the boats as before. Kostya and Timofey rowed. Yegorka played with the tortoise. He was afraid it would starve and tried to force into its mouth a tuft of grass, then two dragon-flies whose wings he had torn off. The tortoise poked about

in the bottom of the boat and refused to eat anything. This upset Yegorka.

"Don't worry," Kostya reassured him, "tortoises can live a long time without food. Perhaps it won't eat anything all the way to Kiev."

It was only when they neared the bank that everyone saw what a big pile of osier branches they had cut. A lorry was drawn up beside the pile, and Ivan Kuzmich and the driver were loading it.

Mitya, flag in hand, was the first to jump ashore.

"Fall in!" he ordered.

Now Kostya stood in the line, between Timofey and Nyura, and nobody said anything, only Mitya raised his eyebrows in surprise, but apparently realised that Kostya had earned this right.

Ivan Kuzmich walked up to the detachment. Mitya handed the flag to the boy on the right flank and reported.

"Comrade team leader! The Sasha Chekalin Detachment has carried out the special task. Nothing untoward happened."

Ivan Kuzmich did not know what the regulation reply to a report was and said with cordial simplicity: "Thank you, boys and girls! You did a fine job. In behalf of the kolkhoz, thank you!"

"Always ready!" came the thunderous chorus.

"Perhaps we can help with the loading, too?" Elena Ivanovna suggested.

"Let's," they all shouted, and made a rush for the pile of branches.

Ivan Kuzmich and the driver had all they could do to cope with the bundles that came showering into the back of the lorry from all sides. The Young Pioneers piled the back of the lorry with osier in a few minutes and the driver secured it with a rope.

"The youngsters are probably dead beat," Ivan Kuzmich said to Elena Ivanovna. "We'll make a second run and give you all a lift back to the village."

"Why drive the truck needlessly and waste petrol?" Mitya objected reasonably. "You have to go right round, but we'll take the short cut across the gully, and be home before you."

"Mitya's right, but take this little boy with you," Elena Ivanovna said.

"This one? Oh, Yegorka?" Ivan Kuzmich smiled. "Want a ride? We've got a sleeper for you, first class, soft seats and plenty of fresh air."

He picked Yegorka up and tossed him to the driver who was still standing on top of the pile of osier. Yegorka smiled blissfully, but almost immediately his face fell: the tortoise was still on the ground below.

Kostya picked it up. It was his find and he had meant to take it home to Kiev and did not feel like parting with it now. But after hesitating a bare second he tossed the tortoise into the air.

"Catch it!" he cried.

Yegorka clutched at the string with both hands and a happy smile lit up his face again.

"Fall in!" Elena Ivanovna ordered. "It's time to go."

Senya blew his bugle again, the drum rolled, and the detachment marched across the meadow to the gully. Ivan Kuzmich climbed on the lorry and sat down beside Yegorka. The driver started up the engine.

"Good-bye, Yegorka!" Nyura cried, waving her hand.

The lorry moved away. Yegorka sat rocking on the soft pile of osier, holding on hard to the tortoise, his face a picture of perfect bliss.

"Hold on, Konstantin!"

The heat grew more and more intense. Every morning tufts of shimmery snow-white clouds appeared in the sky. They avoided the sun as though afraid of melting in its heat; but melt they did—long before evening. Uncle Efim shook his head and said that if it kept up like this and did not rain, all the vegetables would shrivel up. Timofey worried about his saplings, but Kostya never felt better in his life. Only the stuffy nights bothered him. Waking up for lack of air he would notice faint distant flashes of mute lightning and foretell rain for the next day, but in the

morning the sun would be as hot as ever, so hot that even the tar on the boats melted and streamed down in hot, black tears, while the osier leaves curled up and rustled as though they were made of paper.

On Sunday, Nyura cooked the dinner and went to see Granny. Some things they had to do in the village kept Misha and Timofey away, and Kostya was left to his own devices.

The day was especially hot and close.

"It may rain; the heat's unbearable," Uncle Efim said at dinner.

"I don't think so. You'll see!" Kostya said confidently.

"We'll see. Since our housekeeper isn't here, you'll have to do the washing-up."

Kostya worked away with the rag and piece of bast Nyura usually washed the dishes with, but somehow could not rub the grease off the plates and they remained sticky. He thought he could do a better job of it with sand. Making a pile of the pots and crockery, he carried them to the river-bank. The chore proved long and irksome, and when Kostya finally finished the sun had disappeared behind a visibly swelling cloud. From time to time it peeped out through little gaps in the cloud, but soon these gaps closed.

A dark, ominous cloud crawled across the sky from the western horizon, while a flimsy bank of little white clouds fled before it to the east; but the dark cloud followed them slowly, inexorably, wreathing and rumbling as it advanced.

The river turned glassy and, for an instant, Kostya thought it had stopped flowing. The trembling branches of the weeping willows grew still and the osier leaves ceased rustling. Low broken claps of thunder sounded somewhere above the shaggy grey cloud that had enveloped the sky and made the air still more stuffy.

"I think I'll make my rounds now. It'll grow dark early," Uncle Efim said. "You stay and look after the house."

He pushed off. After putting the dishes away Kostya lay down on his back and watched the clouds. They piled up and covered the entire sky. Twilight fell, then it grew quite dark. Uncle Efim did not return. Neither did Nyura. Granny must have been fright-

ened by the weather and made Nyura stay overnight with her. Kostya opened the door and windows to let some fresh air into the room, went to bed and fell asleep.

A deafening pealing and rumbling woke him up; he started out of bed in fright and peered with bewilderment into the darkness. The wind howled and whistled through the room, a pane flew out of the banging window-frames, crashing to the floor, and the door kept knocking against the wall. Kostya fought the howling blast to close the door, then ran to the window. Broken glass and bits of tile crunched underfoot and something stuck into his heel. Slamming the window, he stuffed a blanket into the frame where the pane had been blown out and, finding a box of matches, lit the lamp with trembling hands.

The room was in chaos. The table-cloth together with Uncle Efim's dinner had been swept on to the floor, the macaroni was strewn all over the place and the rissoles lay in a pool of milk. The clothes-rack near the door dangled from a single nail and the clothes lay in a jumbled heap on the floor. Near the window there was a pile of shards, glass, earth and crumpled and torn plants—the remains of Nyura's potted flowers that had decorated the windowsill. Uncle Efim wasn't there. The wind screamed angrily and shrilly in the chimney.

Kostya pushed against the door; at first it resisted, then swung open by itself and when he closed it softly behind him, it smote him in the back, pushing him out on the porch. A stiff wall of wind pinned Kostya to the cottage wall; he tore away with difficulty and went into the black, roaring void towards the river, where something was raging and lashing violently. The thunder clattered overhead as if iron barrels were rolling in the sky. A blinding tree of flame, with the crown downwards, cut through the darkness and everything around turned whitish-blue, like the screen at the pictures when the film tears. The pale osier lay pressed to the ground, the willows flapped their long whip-like branches helplessly, the black foaming water beat against the bank, boiled furiously as it rolled away, then came rushing back.

The sky above crashed and thundered with such a din that

Kostya jumped off the steep bank in alarm and hugged the slope. He was not afraid of a thunderstorm. But it was one thing in the city, where there were brick walls, lightning-conductors on the rooftops, and a cosy electric light in the room, and another thing here, in pitch darkness on a deserted bank, without shelter or company, only the cold piercing wind, the raging frothing black water and the uproar that made your eardrums feel they were bursting.

The worst of it was that he was alone. Uncle Efim was away somewhere and except for him there was no one who could come here; Kostya suddenly felt small, helpless and lonely on this vast deserted bank. He wanted to run away, hide, to shut out everything. But this thought made him ashamed as soon as it entered his head. He, Kostya Golovanov, showing the white feather! Perhaps something had happened to Uncle Efim and he needed assistance.

Kostya shielded his face with his hands and bent against the wind as he fought his way to the place where the spare buoys and spars were stored. The wind had wrought havoc among the spars, but Uncle was not there. He walked along the bank in both directions, but did not see a sign of either Uncle Efim or his boat. He went to the water's edge again and shouted, but the wind muffled his ringing voice like cotton wool.

Trees of flame with enormous branches came hurtling down from the sky on all sides, and each flash was followed by a crash in the heavens; it was as if the enormous black clouds had hardened into stone and were falling in a continuous avalanche on the terror-hushed earth.

At a flash of lightning Kostya saw something black, long and fat speeding toward the bank, hurling itself against it and throwing up a heap of wet sand with its thick snout. Kostya jumped aside in terror. He knew quite well that there were no monsters in the Dnieper, but who could tell? . . . Everything he had learned at school went out of his head and he waited with a sinking heart for this monster to open its jaws. But the jaws did not open and the monster lay with its head buried in the sand, twitching and beating its tail in the water. Then the tail turned to the right, the

monster slid off the sand and swam away, and in the next flash of lightning Kostya saw to his intense relief that what he had taken for a monster was only a log.

He closed his eyes and shook his head—so ashamed was he of his fright—and calmed down at once. This was just an ordinary thunderstorm, with its usual lightning, thunder and wind. Really nothing to be afraid of!

He went back to the cottage and set about tidying up methodically. He hung the clothes up on the pegs, spread the table-cloth, swept the macaroni into a pile near the door, and heaped the broken glass and the remains of the flower-pots into a pail. Lightning still streaked the thundering sky, the wind went on howling and shrieking, but Kostya was not afraid any more.

When he had tidied up, he sat on the edge of his bed and waited for Uncle Efim. He kept an eye on the clock but a gust of wind threw the pendulum against the chain, and it got tangled. The clock stopped, and Kostya did not know how much time had passed. But still Uncle Efim did not come. Kostya wondered what could keep him on the river in this weather, and began to imagine all sorts of things that soon had him upset again. He tried not to think of them, but the more he tried the more he thought.

Rain started drumming on the roof, faintly at first then stronger and stronger, till the noise filled the room. The rain beat against the windows and streamed down the panes. Kostya watched it and felt sorry it was night. If it had been day-time he could have run to Roaring Gully to see if it really roared or whether Nyura had made that all up. . . .

The door opened, the rain whipped across the threshold and Uncle Efim appeared in its slanting torrents. He shut the door behind him and walked to the table. His stiff raincoat was dripping wet, but he did not take it off and, sitting down on a stool, placed his hands carefully on the table.

"Awake, eh?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Kostya nodded.

He jumped off the bed eagerly to tell Uncle Efim how he had woken up, how the wind had smashed the window-pane and

flower-pots, but stopped suddenly and stared with alarm at Uncle Efim's hands. His left wrist seemed very big in comparison with the right one. Swollen and bruised, it made a terrifying purple patch on the table-cloth. Uncle Efim was pale and breathed heavily as though he had been running a long time uphill.

"Got squashed by a log," Efim Kondratyevich said, noticing Kostya's frightened glance. "Looks like a raft got loose somewhere upstream—the fairway's clogged up with logs and they're behaving like wild stallions. I think they've gone by now. Should have this bandaged."

Kostya seized a towel.

"Wet it."

Kostya twisted the towel, wound it round Uncle's wrist and tied it with a piece of string to keep it in place.

"A bad business," Uncle Efim said, looking at his bandaged hand.

"Never mind, it'll heal," Kostya comforted him, trying to make his voice sound confident and cheerful.

"I'm not worrying about my wrist, it'll heal. The light's gone on the buoy over the Ridge, near Devil's Tooth. Could be the wind did it, or these logs. That buoy's in the middle of the mainstream, and it looks like they smacked right into it. Maybe knocked it off altogether—"

"Then we have to—" Kostya began, but broke off.

It had to be lighted, of course, but how could that be done? In this darkness there was little likelihood of finding a barge, let alone a buoy. And if it was gone—what then? How could it be reached? With one hand injured, Uncle could not be expected to row, while Kostya—he turned cold at the thought of the gurgling, frothing water and the waves furiously whipping the bank, picturing himself in the middle of these waves.

"What if I run to the village for help?" Kostya asked.

Uncle Efim turned toward the window. The rain was buffeting against it in dirty-white torrents that turned blue with every flash of lightning.

"No," he said, "you won't get across the gully now. And there's

no time to get round." He took out his watch, looked at it and closed the lid with a loud click. "The express boat for Kherson's due in three hours."

"But in this weather do they—"

"It's the skipper's business whether the steamer puts out or not. He doesn't ask me. My business is to see that the buoys are lighted. And one of them is out!" The muscles on Uncle's cheeks twitched and froze in angry lumps.

So there they sat, the man and the boy, looking at the rain driving against the windows, and thinking the same thought. In this splashing stream Kostya visualised a large white steamer feeling its way carefully along the raging river. The passengers were sleeping soundly, but the entire crew was peering into the whitish haze of rain, looking for the buoy. There was no light ahead; that meant they had passed by without noticing it. Everyone sighed with relief and the officer of the watch spoke into the brass speaking-tube ordering the engine-room to pick up speed. The steamer rolled as it gathered speed, and suddenly, with a crash and a clang, everything on deck collapsed; the shiny moss-covered rock bit into the steamer's hull, letting in the lashing water that could not be stopped or pumped out. The lights went out, the passengers, thrown out of their bunks, screamed and shouted, and what came after was so frightful that Kostya almost jumped off his chair to run for help.

But there was nowhere to run to and no one to hear his calls. The more he realised that, the more terrifying it became. He looked again and again at his uncle. Uncle Efim was staring fixedly at the window.

The wrinkles on his brow and at the edges of his lips had deepened and become sharper. He stood up and raised his left hand gingerly.

"You'll have to help me, Konstantin," he said, looking searchingly at Kostya.

"Of course, I will," Kostya said, springing up promptly.

They took two red lanterns from the storeroom, filled and lighted them.

"Put on something warm."

"Oh, I won't be cold," Kostya protested but, meeting Uncle Efim's stern look, said no more and put on his trousers and a jacket.

Uncle Efim gave him a canvas-covered cork life belt which Kostya tied around his chest. The life belt was too big for him and the cork bars stuck into his armpits, forcing him to hold his arms out. Uncle Efim took a length of thick rope with a loop on its end and a piece of thinner rope, while Kostya picked up the lanterns, and they went out into the stinging rain and headed for the river.

The boat was a third full of water, but the waves tossed and shook it all the same. Kostya bailed the water out with a scoop, while his uncle tied the lanterns to the bow and put a boat-hook under the thwarts.

"I'll tow the boat with the rope and you steer. Try to keep her about two arms' length from the bank so she doesn't ground. Think you'll manage?"

"Yes."

"Not scared?"

"No."

Uncle Efim tied the thin rope round Kostya's waist and fastened the end to his belt, then with Kostya's help he tied the thick rope to the ring on the boat's prow and slipped the loop round his shoulder.

"Well, hold on, Konstantin!" Uncle Efim said sternly, his voice carrying a note of anxiety.

"All right; nothing to worry about".

Uncle Efim released the boat's prow and in the twinkling of an eye it was carried away into the tumult of waves and rain. Kostya's courage vanished. He clutched at the thwart frantically and was horrified to see Uncle Efim and the bank disappear, leaving him alone in the wet, slippery boat at the mercy of the tossing waves. He realised that his uncle was near at hand, that he had to take the oar and steer, but the thought that he would be instantly blown out of the madly rocking boat into the cold black water if he released his grip kept his hands glued to the thwart.

"Ready?" he heard Uncle Efim ask through the squall of rain. Kostya freed his hands from the thwart and gripped the oar. "Ready!" he called back.

The boat jerked, rocked and by the way the waves were beating under the raised bow Kostya guessed it was being towed against the current.

In the flashes of lightning that cut across the rioting sky he saw Uncle Efim's bent body struggling in the rain. He was quite near, about twenty yards away, and Kostya had now regained full control of himself. Should anything happen, he could turn the boat and drive its bow into the bank. What was more, the rope around Kostya had its end secured to Uncle Efim's belt. That precaution, he felt, was one too many, like making assurance doubly sure, for in addition to the rope there was the life belt. But as soon as a gust of wind sent the boat rocking more than usual, Kostya, his hands tightly on the oar, pressed his elbows to his sides to get the reassuring feel of the rope round his waist. Quite a lot of time passed in this way. Kostya did not know how long and he did not have the opportunity to think of it. He saw that steering a boat that was being towed from the bank was not easy after all. It stuck against the bank twice and each time Uncle Efim came up and silently pushed it off. The rain was now coming down in a drizzle and through it Kostya could distinguish the bank; he peered so intently and put so much effort into steering the boat that he completely forgot his fear.

The boat turned sharply and Uncle Efim pulled it in.

"That's all; out you get!"

"But how will you? How can you by yourself?" Kostya asked, pleading and protesting at the same time, but Uncle Efim did not reply and he had no alternative but to climb out on the bank.

Uncle Efim handed Kostya his raincoat and ropes, placed the boat-hook closer within reach and took the steering oar.

"Give the boat a shove. And go home," he said.

Kostya managed to give the boat a good shove although his feet kept skidding on the wet clay. He saw Uncle Efim holding the steering oar with his left elbow and rowing energetically with his

right hand; the boat turned, moved off into the darkness and soon Kostya lost sight of his uncle and the boat and only the red lights of the lanterns bobbed unsteadily.

Kostya was shivering with cold; the wind pierced his wet jacket and the trousers clung to his legs, but he did not go home. He watched the lights and hoped the buoy was in place. Uncle Efim was going in that direction, counting on the current to carry the boat to the Ridge. But would he get to the right spot? This was not day-time when you could see the banks, the other buoys and get your bearings. Nothing could be seen out there now except the raging, foaming water.

The lights on the boat receded fast, merged into one and disappeared. Kostya climbed on a hillock from where he caught sight of the light again, saw it flickering, as though the wind were trying to blow it out, and then moving rapidly with the current to the right. He ran along the bank, tripped, slid on the clay, fell, rose without feeling any pain and ran on, afraid to lose sight of the light bobbing on the waves. It came closer and closer to the bank and Kostya unexpectedly found the boat scraping its bow against the sand near him. He caught the rope tied to the bow and held it to prevent the current from carrying the boat away. Uncle Efim was sitting on the middle thwart with his head in his hands; Kostya heard his laboured, hoarse breathing even above the noise of the waves. When he regained his breath he stood up in the boat, noticing Kostya only then.

"Gone. The buoy's either gone or I didn't find it, the devil only knows. Good that you stayed. I must make another try upstream—"

Kostya got into the boat again, sat on the stern and gripped the steering oar, while Uncle Efim slipped the rope round his waist and towed the boat to the place from where he calculated the current would carry it to the buoy on Devil's Tooth. The rain had stopped and the wind had slackened, only the waves continued tossing and throwing the boat about as before, but this time Kostya was not afraid. He had no time to think of the black, raging water, of its depth and dangers—he rowed with all his strength to lighten his uncle's load and to prevent the boat from grounding. The

thunder rolled as before and branching fire-trees girdled the horizon, lighting up Uncle Efim's wearily trudging figure.

At last Uncle Efim pulled the boat to the bank and sat on the bow to recover his breath. Kostya moved close up to him, and although he knew the chances of his uncle taking him were slim, he pleaded eagerly, his voice betraying his desperation.

"Uncle Efim, take me along! It'll be difficult all by yourself—you can't manage with one hand, can you? And I'll help. Well, a little, but still it'd be something. Think I'm scared? Not a bit! You've got to row and look at the same time. But together we'll find it! What do you say, Uncle Efim? Will you take me?"

Uncle Efim shook his head silently. Kostya pleaded still more eagerly.

"Do you think I'll be scared? Why, I'm more scared out here all alone! But with you I wouldn't be. And how will you manage with one hand? You won't find it again and soon the steamer. What d'you say, Uncle Efim? I'm strong now and I row well, you know!"

"And what will your mother say?"

"Mother?" Kostya shut his eyes at the thought. If Mother found out! This was not the same thing as pulling Lyolka by her ribbon or sitting down to dinner with dirty hands.

"But she won't even know!" Kostya said, as if that settled the matter.

"Oh, no, my friend, I'm not going to lie," Uncle Efim replied. But after a long pause he said: "All right. We've got little time and with one hand I may miss it again."

Kostya sat down to row and Uncle Efim pushed off with the steering oar. The current caught the boat, pitching and rolling it violently.

Only then did Kostya realise what he had let himself in for. This was a stiff job; not like rowing on a peaceful river in quiet clear weather. The waves beat and jerked the oars, taking them out of his control; they dragged through the air or plunged into the water up to the looms, while the wet, slippery handles wriggled in his hands like live things, tried to hit his chest or his knees,

throw him off the thwart and tear themselves out of his grasp. He clenched his teeth and strained himself to the utmost but his strength was ebbing, he began to pant, and the waves grew bigger and the oars became harder and harder to control.

From somewhere down below an icy wave of irrepressible, desperate fear that they would never find the buoy surged over Kostya, stopping his breath and turning his body numb. The waves were getting stronger and Kostya felt they would wrench the oars out of his hands, fill and overturn the boat, sweep him and Uncle Efim out in different directions, fling them violently against the Ridge, catch them in a whirlpool and suck them down. He wanted them to get out of this furious watery tempest now, before it was too late, and he pulled convulsively at the oars with shorter, hurried strokes.

"Steady, Kostya, steady! Stick to it!" he heard above the splashing and howling.

Anger and burning shame overwhelmed him. What about real sailors in a storm? This way he would never be a sailor.

"Coward! Coward!" he whispered to himself through his teeth and angry tears mingled with the raindrops on his cheeks.

These tears somewhat relaxed his numbness and Kostya began timing his strokes to the rocking of the boat; the oars stopped beating the water wildly or senselessly or trying to tear themselves out of his hand as furiously as before. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not see where and how far they went, but now he noticed that the boat had stopped rolling and that the waves were beating the bow. He guessed Uncle Efim had turned it against the current.

"Pull harder!" Uncle Efim called.

He was standing in the stern with his back to Kostya and scanning the grim, boiling water in the light of the flashes of lightning, now less frequent.

Kostya pulled for all he was worth, putting his whole weight on the oars. If only they would get to the right spot and not miss the buoy. He felt he would not have any strength left for a second attempt.

Uncle Efim turned round suddenly and Kostya thought there was anger in his shout: "Pull! Pull harder!"

He was working the steering oar with all his strength, pulling the boat to the right. Kostya rowed so hard that he rose with every stroke, bringing his full weight down on the oars with each pull; he heard someone breathing painfully right in his ears without realising that the heavy, wheezing breathing was his own. Uncle released the steering oar, picked up the boat-hook and thrust it into the water to the left.

"Ship oars," Uncle ordered.

Kostya feathered his oars and the boat was thrown to one side by a wave, immediately spinning round to point its bow downstream; but the current did not carry it away.

"Have we found it? Found the buoy?" Kostya shouted, panting.

"Here, hold the boat-hook and pass me the grapnel!" Uncle Efim ordered in reply.

Kostya gripped the end of the boat-hook's handle and his uncle took hold of it, too, and pressed it to his body with his left elbow, while with his right hand he threw out the grapnel. The grapnel fell short and he threw it in again. This time it bit into something. Uncle Efim lowered the boat-hook, tied the grapnel line to the boat-ring and then tied the boat-hook handle to it. Wiping his face with his sleeve, he turned to Kostya and suddenly hugged him with his sound hand.

"Thanks, Konstantin! Well done, lad!" he said.

Kostya choked with happiness, but then he remembered how he had churned the water with the oars in panic and a hot wave of embarrassment overwhelmed him again.

"But I didn't . . . it wasn't me," he mumbled uneasily.

"We deserve a medal for this business. Or a drink, at least," Uncle Efim laughed.

Kostya burst out laughing, too. Really, it was no joke finding a small wooden triangle in such a thunderstorm and tying the boat to it in pitch darkness with the river howling and raging. Uncle Efim and Kostya were so elated with their success that they paid no heed to the rain, which had started again, or to the piercing

wind, which kept blowing harder, cleaving the whitish shreds of rain and chilling Uncle Efim and Kostya to the bones.

"What about the buoy?" Kostya asked suddenly in consternation.

"That's the whole trouble!" Uncle Efim said. "It's gone, smashed. Nothing but the base left. It's a mystery to me how I managed to find it."

"What are we going to do? Where are we going to put the lantern?"

"Nowhere. We'll have to stay here ourselves instead. You must be cold, eh?"

"N-no," Kostya replied, and only now felt he was really very cold.

Uncle Efim unbuttoned his jacket and pressed Kostya to his chest. Like Kostya he was dripping wet, but his big, strong body was warm and Kostya warmed up gradually.

Now that the fierce strain of fighting the waves, wind and thrashing oars, which had crowded out fear, was over, and there was nothing to do except sit and wait, the waves beating against the boat again looked terrifying to Kostya, and every gust of wind seemed fraught with disaster. The water came over the side, rippling at Kostya's feet, and the rain continued unabated. He bailed, then moved closer to Uncle Efim, feeling safer that way.

"I wish I had a smoke," Uncle Efim said.

However, there was nothing he could do about it, as the matches were sodden wet and the tobacco a sticky, slimy mess. And Uncle Efim pulled at his empty pipe, while Kostya tried to make himself as small as possible, for sitting with wet clothes in a gusty wind was not as cheerful and pleasant as running out under a shower of rain on a hot day.

So they sat waiting, an hour, two hours. . . . The rain ceased and the wind dropped, but the waves went on raging and the darkness was as black as ever. The steamer was long overdue, but as there was still no sign of it they carried on waiting: Devil's Tooth had to be guarded. And the longer they sat there, the clearer Kostya realised that the most difficult part of the whole business was not

the crossing and the search for the buoy, but this motionless waiting in the cold wetness. But they had to wait no matter how hard it was. And sit and wait they did.

Kostya imagined to himself all the details of a snow-white steamer driving the waves before it and spreading light and music over the river as it passed by, while he and Uncle Efim showed it the way with lanterns. But that was not how it happened.

A long, low hooting reached them from somewhere up-stream, and a tall white light, like an eye boring into the darkness, appeared round the island, then this was joined by green and red lights set wide apart, while between these there was a hardly distinguishable grey hulk that bore down on the little boat. Kostya gripped the thwart convulsively and waited with a quaking heart for this hulk to crunch the boat under it. Uncle raised a red lantern and held it high over his head.

Kostya was blinded for an instant by a stream of light falling on the water and the boat. It was so dazzling that he thought the steamer had fired a gun at them. Then the searchlight went out and for a minute Kostya could not distinguish anything, and when he regained his sight he saw only the green side-light and the white mast-light. The grey hulk advanced, veering to the left and leaving the boat on its starboard side. A man leaned over the railings on the bridge and asked in a megaphone-distorted voice: "Buoy swept away?"

"Smashed by a raft or a log! Never mind! Everything's all right!" Uncle Efim replied.

The man stood up straight and the grey hulk, its engines throbbing loudly, passed by and soon only the vanishing lights and the waves tossing the boat showed that a steamer had really passed and that it was not the work of his imagination.

Kostya wanted to shout and tell everyone on board the steamer what he and Uncle Efim had done, what heroes they were. He had imagined how the frightened, shaken passengers would crowd the railings and look with terror at the waves swelling over the Ridge, how much admiration and gratitude would be in their eyes when they looked at him. But the passengers were sleeping peacefully

without suspecting anything, and the officer of the watch had not even noticed Kostya.

The pale, grey dawn pushed the sky upwards and widened the horizon. The bank and the island could be made out faintly. Uncle Efim and Kostya could leave the Ridge now as it would be daylight soon and Devil's Tooth would not be so dangerous.

Uncle Efim put out the lanterns, freed the boat-hook and grapnel and the boat was picked up by the current. On the way back Kostya rowed confidently and calmly: things were not so frightening in the daylight.

The first thing Uncle Efim did when they got home was to light the stove, put on a kettle and bring out a half-pint bottle of vodka.

"Get undressed!" he ordered.

"But Uncle, I'm not cold any more. I'm not afraid of the cold," Kostya protested.

"In that case it'll do you all the more good. Take your clothes off!"

Kostya undressed. Uncle Efim poured some vodka on the palm of his hand and began rubbing Kostya down. His hand was as rough as emery-paper and Kostya's skin turned red immediately and started burning as if it were scalded.

"That's enough, Uncle Efim, I'm hot already!" Kostya begged.

But Uncle Efim continued rubbing, then wrapped Kostya in a sheepskin coat; he drank up what was left of the vodka and put a snorting kettle on the table.

They ate black bread with salt on it and drank tea that was so strong it was almost black, and Kostya thought he never ate or drank anything so delicious. His skin burned, a warmth spread over his entire body and his face shone with sweat. He told Uncle Efim how the thunderstorm had woken him up, how he had been frightened, and somehow he was not ashamed of confessing it now. Perhaps it was that though he might have been frightened at the time, he had done everything that had had to be done. . . .

Uncle Efim listened, puffing at his pipe and nodding approvingly. And when Kostya started mumbling and his head began to droop, he picked him up gently and tucked him into bed.

"But I'm not a bit sleepy! I won't even go to sleep," Kostya protested thickly and dozed off that very moment.

Uncle Efim blew out the lamp—for it was already day—put on his jacket and went out.

"We'll Meet Again"

Kostya slept long and soundly, without dreaming. A sunbeam, crawling across the room, stole up his face; he blinked, puckered his face and woke up. The room was tidy, the floor scrubbed. Outside, the grasshoppers were vying with each other in song and the sand-martins twittered. Kostya left the room and saw his trousers and jacket drying on a line; Nyura was rinsing something on the bank. Kostya went to join her and was surprised to find that he ached in every limb. His whole body was still heavy with the strain of the previous night's adventure, his fingers stood out like the points of a rake and he could hardly bend them. His palms were in blisters, his scratched skin smarted. But Kostya enjoyed the feeling of this heaviness in his muscles and the burning in his palms.

The thunderstorm had washed and spruced up the bank. The tall meadow grass looked greener, the willows and osier more luxuriant, the sky clearer and the running road of the river bluer. Never had all this looked so cheerful and beautiful as now, never had Kostya felt so fine and happy. Why was this so? He did not give that a thought. He was happy and wanted to be happier. He broke into a run and tore into the river at full speed near Nyura, startling her and nearly making her fall into the water.

"My, but you're scratched all over! And bruised, too! There, and there," she said with a mingling of sympathy and admiration in her voice when Kostya climbed out of the water. Uncle Efim had already told her about their adventures, but she wanted more details and pestered Kostya for them.

"Come, tell me everything," she insisted. "You went out in the boat with Daddy, didn't you? Were you scared? I was. Wasn't it

frightful the way the storm kept booming and thundering! And the lightning was like it was aimed right at you! Did you have the same feeling, too? I wanted to come home, but Granny wouldn't hear of it. I'd have gone with you if I had done. But I couldn't have got across the Gully anyhow. It was difficult enough even in the morning, the water was whirling and whirling! Daddy carried me over on his back."

"Where's Uncle Efim?"

"Putting up a new buoy. Came to the village in the morning, all wet and covered with clay from crossing the Gully. And the kolkhoz chairman gave him two men and they're putting up the buoy now. Well, why don't you say something? Tell me about it!"

Kostya told her of his adventures, but somehow it didn't sound as frightening and difficult as it really was. Nyura nodded admiringly, prompted and encouraged him, but all this only made his story more ordinary and dull.

And, really, was there anything special to tell? Uncle Efim had done everything; he had only helped to row and bail the water out. All right, he had gone out in a thunderstorm and it had been quite frightening.

That was all. He did not see anything heroic about it. The important thing was that the steamer had passed the Ridge safely on its way to Kakhovka, where Mother and many other people were going to build a power plant. These people could not afford to have their work held up, could they?

Misha and Timofey arrived a little later. The sun was as mercilessly hot as before the thunderstorm. They all lay on the sand, but it was so hot that they kept rolling from their backs to their stomachs and again to their backs. Misha and Timofey harassed Kostya with questions, but he did not feel like going over the whole story again and said casually:

"The Ridge buoy was swept away during the night. I helped Uncle Efim."

But Nyura told the story for him, and she told it so enthusiastically, with such terrifying details that Kostya had to frown and shake his head. Misha and Timofey looked at his bruises

with respect, while Kostya whistled nonchalantly, basking in his fame.

Soon Timofey and Misha went away to attend to their affairs. Well, what of it, he also had a duty to attend to! He ran to meet Uncle Efim who was pulling his boat out of the river.

"Up already, my lad?" Uncle Efim smiled. "Not got a cough, eh?"

"No. How's your hand? Why didn't you take me along?"

"I will another time. Thanks to the boys from the kolkhoz I managed all right. The hand's all right, it'll heal gradually."

Kostya helped him store the oars and tools and stuck to him till evening. And in the evening when Uncle Efim started on his rounds, Kostya went out with him without saying a word. The swelling on his uncle's hand had gone down, but it still hurt him to row and Kostya helped diligently.

Kostya slept soundly, but at daybreak when it was time to make the rounds of the buoys again, he was wide awake although Uncle Efim tried to go off quietly.

"Where d'you think you're going?"

"With you."

"You finish your beauty sleep! You need it."

"No, I'm going," Kostya said stubbornly and looked at Uncle Efim with such pleading eyes that he dropped his objections and they left together.

This was repeated day after day. Nothing exciting happened again, but now Kostya no longer considered lighting and putting out the lights on the river dull, or the job of a river watchman tedious.

To be more exact, he now felt himself a master of the river and not its watchman.

Nothing had ever given him so much pleasure and happiness as these trips to the buoys! Kostya did not understand the reason for this, and truth to tell, he did not care. Only later would he come to understand that before he had done things just for himself and now he was doing something that benefited others, and that real happiness lay in doing things useful to other people.

Even when you have been expecting them, telegrams, for some reason, always arrive unexpectedly. That was the way with the telegram Kostya received from Mother: she was back in Kiev already and it was time for Kostya to go home. This news made Kostya both glad and sorry: he wanted to see Mother, his best friend Fyodor, the other boys and even Lyolka; but he did not want to leave his new friends. However, he had to go.

The four friends made the rounds of all the fish ponds and channels, swam, dived till their ears rang, but did not talk much. They were all sorry Kostya had to go, and Misha urged him to come back after spending a few days in Kiev.

"Think he'll come back?" Timofey drawled, and there was a downcast, pained look on his plump face, usually so cheerful and placid.

"You know, boys? We'll meet again!" Nyura said. "What if we go to Kiev? Right? Just up and go? What about it?"

"Right," Kostya seconded. "That would be grand! And I'll show you absolutely everything!"

"Well, I'd like to see us being allowed to do that," Timofey said doubtfully.

All of them knew that really it was not so simple as it sounded, and that made them even gloomier.

Timofey brought Kostya a sack of apples as a parting gift.

"They're early ones, a Michurin variety," he said impressively. "Only be sure to send the pips back to me."

And Kostya realised that there could not be a more generous and selfless act.

Nyura stuffed a bag full of pies she had baked herself, while Uncle Efim gave him a gilt Navy badge embroidered on a piece of cloth that could be sewn on a cap or hung on the wall over his desk. Misha did not bring a present and was crest-fallen over this; looking around for some way to mark Kostya's departure, he gathered a pile of dry osier, and when Uncle Efim lifted Kostya up to the steamer (it was the *Ashkhabad* again), he set a match to

the bonfire. The smoke rose in a tall pillar to the sky, forming a milestone on its high blue vault.

"What are you glum about, sailor?" Kostya was asked by his old friend, the cheerful second mate. "See the send-off you're getting. You ought to be glad."

"Uh-huh," Kostya mumbled, feeling he would burst out crying if he said anything else.

He gripped the railings and watched the receding bank. Uncle Efim's tall figure was near the fire and a small red flame flashed near him. It was Nyura's hair. Kostya fought back the tears welling in his eyes. He had grown used to Uncle Efim and Nyura and had come to love them. A little bit of his heart was left behind. And the red buoy over the Ridge bobbed and bowed as though reminding him of this and saying good-bye.

But this mood did not last long. Uncle Efim's cottage disappeared behind a curve in the river, the smoke from Misha's fire melted in the sky, and together with a fresh head wind new feelings overwhelmed Kostya, new thoughts crowded his head.

How was Mother? She must have seen and learned a lot in Kakhovka. Kostya made up his mind to make her tell him everything about the power plant—about the geologists, the builders, the town itself. Perhaps she would take him there if she went again? That would give him a great story for the boys! Even now he had a lot to tell them. He was sure his school companions would gape with wonder when they saw his deep tan and his bleached brows, that now looked as though they were flaxen. And his muscles? To make sure, he tried them again, flexed his arm and felt the hard lump. These muscles were all right! The only thing he regretted was that September 1, the day the school term began, was still far off.

The first thing he intended doing in Kiev was to find out about the Navy Society. Perhaps they would allow him to join? He would not be a navigator for a long time yet, but he had to prepare himself. And there was certainly much to see and learn till then! He was impatient to start, to reach Kiev, his school and do all the things the future held in store for him!

Excited by this expectation of the future, Kostya stamped impatiently on one spot, then ran along the upper deck to the bow as though that would hasten the realisation of his plans and bring him nearer to Kiev, his school and home—to everything that awaited him there.

Again the steamer passed the overgrown shady banks, the hot golden sand-banks and a sparkling smooth surface spread out before him—a blue road that he now no longer considered simple and easy, but all the more wonderful because of that.



A BOY BY THE SEA *

The Chasm

Sashuk bawled all day. His mother scolded and even spanked him, while his father promised to box his ears. This would stop him for a few moments, but he would soon start whining and nagging again. Uncle Semyon drove an old truck up to the office shed. There was a crate of provisions and a barrel of gasoline in the truck. When the fishermen tossed their bags and chests into the back of the truck Sashuk began weeping so broken-heartedly that Ivan Danilovich, the team leader, looked around in surprise, came over and crouched before him. "What's all the noise about?"

"Pu—pp," Sashuk sobbed.

"What's the matter with him, Nastya?" Ivan Danilovich asked the boy's mother.

"He's set his heart on taking his puppy along. But what'll we do with a puppy? There's enough to worry about as is."

Ivan Danilovich towered over Sashuk. He stopped crying as he looked up at the man and swallowed a sob. Then, hearing his mother's words, he began bawling again.

"Stop it!" Ivan Danilovich said and winced. "You're making more noise than a foghorn. Is this him?"

A wicker basket was set on the ground between Sashuk's feet. In it a spotted puppy was asleep, with its head hanging over the side. They could hear him snoring softly.

"Looks like he's had a hard day," Ivan Danilovich said and chuckled. "All right, bring your mutt along. Nastya, let him take the dog, don't torture the boy."

"Oh!" Sashuk gasped, his eyes shining.

"You go wash your face. I've never yet seen a fisherman with his face full of snot and tears."

Sashuk dashed over to the well, splashed some water from the scoop onto his face and wiped it with the tail of his shirt. Then he snatched up the basket and ran towards the truck.

"Ready? Go over to your mother. Nastya, you and the boy sit in the cab. The road gets so bad after Izmail it'll knock the breath out of you."

"But you have to be next to the driver."

"No matter. I don't want you getting sick again."

Ivan Danilovich swept Sashuk up, and a moment later both he and his basket were settled in the cab. "Don't touch the door handle. If you fall out we'll never be able to pick up the pieces."

His mother sat beside Uncle Semyon. Sashuk stood by the seat with his head out the window. The boys from their street were all there. Some had come to see off their fathers, others had just come to gape. Some were already waving good-bye. Sashuk waved, too. Just a bit, however. They'd all see he was leaving, while none of them were going anyplace.

"Everybody here?" Ivan Danilovich called. "All right, Semyon. Let's go. So long."

Uncle Semyon stepped on the gas. The truck shuddered and began to move. The boys shouted and ran alongside it, but were soon left behind. The village huts flashed by. At the bend in the road the leaden surface of the Lake Yalpukh flashed in the sun. Soon there were no more huts, no Yalpukh, nothing but cornstalks growing in two solid walls along the road, tossing their yellow tassels and peeping into the cab.

"At this rate we'll never get anyplace," Uncle Semyon grumbled. "It took the whole day to get ready. Now we'll be on the road all night. And believe me, it's murder trying to drive here in broad daylight."

"The road'll end sometime. How will things be there?" Sashuk's mother asked.

"Everything'll be fine."

"You don't say! Then why'd he take that convict along? Who wants him?"

"There's nothing wrong with him. He's a nice fellow."

"He was in jail. They don't put people in jail for nothing."

"Who was in jail?" Sashuk asked.

"That loud-mouthed, red-headed fellow. Zhorka. You keep away from him, son. Hear me?"

Uncle Semyon gave her a funny look but said nothing.

The cornstalks receded. There were little houses on ahead. Then the houses got bigger and bigger.

"What's that?" Sashuk asked.

"That's the town of Izmail."

The houses were now big and tall and long. Sashuk tried to count the windows, but they were going by too fast. It was a big town, bigger than a dozen villages like their Nekrasovka. No, bigger than a hundred villages. And the streets were different. There were trees along the sides and there weren't any ruts or pot-holes in the road. It was so smooth it could have been planed. And there weren't any puddles and no layer of dust, either.

Uncle Semyon stepped on the brake when they reached a crossing. Sashuk spotted a horse set on a big rock. A small man was astride the horse. He had a funny cap in his raised hand.

"Who's that?"

"Suvorov," Uncle Semyon said. "He was a famous general and a helluva fighter."

"Did he beat the nazis like Chapayev?"

"I don't think there were any nazis then. That was real long ago. But who knows, maybe there were different kinds of nazis then."

"Did you fight the nazis, Uncle Semyon?"

"No. I was a driver."

"But that was during the war."

"Yes, it was."

They had reached the end of the town and the end of the good road. The truck swayed and shuddered and bumped along. Dust shot out from under the wheels, rising in a yellow cloud to blot out the setting sun.

Someone began banging on the cab roof.

"Have a heart, Semyon!" Ivan Danilovich shouted.

Uncle Semyon slowed down, but they continued to rock and bounce. Sashuk kept bumping his head against the window-frame. His mother picked him up and sat him on the seat. The wicker basket slid around and bounced on the floor and the puppy inside was frantic. Sashuk slipped off the seat, picked up the basket and sat down again, settling it on his lap. The puppy curled up and went to sleep again.

They drove on and on, with the wheels churning up dust that curled behind them, turning into red balls of fire. Every now and then a slanting column of dust would appear ahead on the road, rushing towards them, rising as high as the sky. An oncoming truck would clatter by, and then everything, both in front and behind, would be drowned in dust. Sashuk and his puppy sneezed, wagging their heads. His mother wiped her face with the corner of her kerchief, while Uncle Semyon cursed under his breath.

The sun was setting. Suddenly everything was becoming dark. Uncle Semyon turned on the headlight, for only the left one worked. A faint yellow beam hit the rutted road. It would snatch a gnarled monster from the darkness that would only turn out to be an old willow tree or a tattered bush. Sashuk's eyes burned. He

felt as if they were full of sand, yet he still sat forward, staring raptly through the windshield.

"Rest your eyes," his mother said. "There's nothing out there and nothing to look at. Try to sleep." She pressed his head against her warm side.

"Aw, Ma, I don't want to sleep," he said and moved away. "When will we get to the sea?"

"We'll get there in the middle of the night, so you have plenty of time to sleep and dream," Uncle Semyon said.

"What's it like? Like the Yalpukh?"

"Ha! The Yalpukh's a puddle, but the sea's a chasm, my boy."

Sashuk looked at him doubtfully. Was Uncle Semyon making fun of him? The Yalpukh was no puddle, not by a long shot. Why, you couldn't see the far bank unless you climbed the willow in the reeds. And you couldn't see where it started or where it ended, no matter how high you climbed.

"What's a chasm?"

"Uh . . . a chasm's a chasm. That means it has no bottom."

"What?"

"You heard me. It has no bottom."

Sashuk tried to imagine something without a bottom but could not. Everything had a bottom. The bottom of the well was very close. When their neighbour Christina dropped the pail into the well they let a grapnel down on a rope, and after fishing around for a while they brought it up. The pail had been lying on the bottom. The Yalpukh was certainly much deeper. Sashuk and his friends had dived there till they were blue but had never touched bottom. It did have a bottom, though. He had seen men driving poles for nets into the bottom and others dropping anchor from a boat. The anchor didn't latch on to the water, after all, but to the bottom. That meant Uncle Semyon was teasing him.

Sashuk glanced up, but Uncle Semyon wasn't laughing. He was peering intently at the road that was so poorly lit by their one headlight. Sashuk followed his gaze. After a while everything seemed jumbled in the yellow beam of light. Then everything blended into a dull ribbon and, finally, went out.

He was awakened by the puppy's whining. Sashuk sat up and swung his feet over the side of the trestle bed. The puppy rushed over, pressed against his feet and whined.

"Shh! Quit bawling!" Sashuk said sternly.

A blinding light was pouring in through the open door of the tiny room.

"Wow!" Sashuk exclaimed and dashed out into the yard after the puppy.

His mother was mixing stew in a huge pot at the wood-burning stove in the yard. Her face was flushed from the heat. Heat blazed over the large, deserted yard, that was trampled as flat as a sheep pen. The only grass there was grew in dusty clumps by the wall of the house and by the pole fence. Even from a distance you could see it was coarse and prickly.

"Where's everybody, Ma?"

"Where'd you think they'd be? Out at sea. Ever since before dawn."

Sashuk followed the direction of her pointing finger. The wasteland beyond the fence gradually turned into a small hill, and nothing was to be seen beyond it.

"Come and have some breakfast," his mother called.

But Sashuk was out of earshot, halfway across the yard and out, darting under a loose pole.

"Don't go into the water!" she shouted after him. "I'll give you a licking you'll remember if you do!"

The hill was covered with coarse, prickly grass, but he paid no attention to the prickles. He was running as hard as he could. The puppy galloped along behind him.

Sashuk ran up the hill, stopped and backed away. There was nothing ahead of him. The hill ended in a straight drop. The cliff was so high he felt his insides go cold.

"Whew!" he whispered, taking a few more steps back, but then went forward again to look over the edge.

Far down below he saw a narrow strip of sand. Small waves lapped at the edge of it. Farther on ahead, to the left and right,

there was nothing. A blue, sparkling, blinding emptiness. Like the sky.

Sashuk glanced up. No, the sky was different. It was endless and far away, but familiar, a motionless blue he was used to seeing. Here and there fluffy white clouds passed slowly by. He lowered his eyes to where the sky became lighter. It glimmered and glittered blindingly in all directions, reaching right up to the place where the small waves lapped against the sand.

His breath came with an effort. So this was the sea. Uncle Semyon had been telling the truth when he said it had no bottom, since it was so huge, and no edges.

He looked along the beach. Far to the right was a tall, latticed tower with a small cabin like a birdhouse perched on top of it. To the left a pier cut into the sea. It wasn't like the pier back in Nekrasovka. That one was low and flat, like a bridge. Here the piles stuck high out of the water. Another latticed structure rose from the decking on poles leading to the high bank to disappear inside a large, long barn. Several gulls were circling over the pier. One of them headed towards him. The gulls here were different, too. The ones over the Yalpuh were small and white, but these were as big as geese and were only white underneath. Their backs were mottled, like that of a wild goose.

"Why are you sitting here? Didn't you hear me calling you? I'll bet you were in swimming. Were you?"

"No. But where are the fishermen, Ma? Do you think they might have drowned?"

The thought had been worrying him, but he only dared speak the words now that his mother was beside him. Well, if the sea had no bottom, like Uncle Semyon said, it wouldn't take much to drown in it.

"Don't you ever even think such a thing!" his mother scolded. "There they are. They're coming in."

"Where?" Sashuk jumped to his feet but couldn't see them. His mother turned his head for him and pointed. Only then did he make out the tiny specks on the glittering surface. They were boats.

"I'll wait for them here, Ma."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. It'll take them another two hours to reach the shore. Come and have breakfast and then we'll both come back to meet them."

Heavy Brine

Wooden gangways with the treads made of squared timber led to the pier. A strange contraption rose between them. It consisted of a long rubber belt that came out of a large barn on the shore and led right down to the pier. The belt rested on iron pulleys and looked like a trough. It was so wide that Sashuk could easily lie in it. The belt disappeared into a big crate on the pier, turned over another pair of pulleys and led back up to the barn.

"What's that?"

"It's a belt to take the fish up into the shed to be salted. Don't lean over the edge, you'll fall in."

Sashuk just had to have a look and he bent over the pier.

There the moving, greenish deep shimmered and splashed. It was three times over your head. And maybe four. It might even be over Ivan Danilovich's head and arms, and he was the tallest man in Nekrasovka. Still, he could see the bottom even though it was deep. It was smooth and sandy, with sun-spots cast by the waves on the surface and shadows flitting across it. But where was the bottomless chasm? Maybe it was out where the boats were?

They were nearing the shore. The two rows of oars lifted together smartly. Each time they sent new sun-spots over to him before they all dipped together. Gulls screeched loudly over the boats, diving and rising like gliders, turning and exposing their fat white bellies, nose-diving and screeching without a stop. The gulls over the Yalpukh never made such a racket.

The boats bobbed up to the pier. They were filled with silvery fish. The men climbed out and dragged flat wooden boxes over to the edge of it. Two men remained in each boat. They used big landing nets to dump the fish from the boats into the boxes. Sashuk

wanted to go to the end of the pier where his father was but slipped on the wet planks and fell.

"What are you doing here?" his father shouted. "Get back on the beach!"

"Let him get used to it. It'll make a man of him!" red-headed Zhorka said.

Sashuk pressed against the post that supported the iron pulleys. Zhorka was on his haunches, sorting the fish in the box. He tossed the long fish with the pretty dark stripes on their backs into a separate box, and the little black-backed fish into the water.

"Why are you throwing them out?"

"Because they're no good. Even the gulls won't eat them. Come and help me. You've got to learn sometime. See, this pretty one with the stripes is a mackerel. It's a top-grade fish. You toss these in here. And this is a ruff. Leave it in here."

"Ruffs aren't like this."

"It's really a mullet, but we call it a ruff."

Sashuk picked up the fish but dropped it right back, for its sharp fins stuck his hand.

A thick, flat pancake of a fish plopped into the box.

"See? Here's our dinner," Zhorka said. "Ever see a fish like this? It's called a flounder."

"Why are its eyes on its back?"

"They're not on its back, they're both on one side. It lies on the bottom on its other side. Here, take it over to your mother. Can you manage it?"

"Sure!" Sashuk said, grabbing hold of the fish. The flounder was so heavy and slippery that he had to press it hard against his stomach. Still, it slipped out of his hands and onto the planks. He tripped over it and its sharp fins scratched his stomach. The men laughed. Sashuk felt offended and walked off to a side. His scratched stomach burned and itched. He wanted to look and see how badly it was hurt and even felt like crying, but he was afraid they'd only laugh more and so pretended he was looking at the gulls. They doubled and grew dim before his eyes. He blinked rapidly to chase away the tears.

The filled boxes were stacked near the rubber belt. Little mullets dropped out of the landing-nets and boxes, falling on the decking. The fishermen in their rubber boots stepped right on them. Sashuk began picking up the fish.

"There's a thrifty boy for you," Ignat, their neighbour from Nek-rasovka, said. "Before you know it he'll be a boatswain."

"He'll be a great boatswain as soon as the brine seeps in," Zhorka added.

"How're you going to get the fish up there? They're all asleep," Sashuk said.

"You'll see. Can we start her up, Ivan Danilovich?"

The team leader nodded. Zhorka stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. At that same moment something rumbled, the decking began to shudder and the rubber belt began moving slowly upward. Two men picked up a box of fish and emptied it into the large box over the rubber trough. A moment later the fish appeared in the trough as a silvery strip raising to the barn.

"Did you ever ride a conveyor belt?" Zhorka shouted over the noise. "No? Want a ride?" He grabbed Sashuk and lifted him high. Sashuk kicked, but before he had a chance to wriggle free he found himself in the moving rubber trough.

"Hang on tight!" Zhorka shouted.

The trough was taking him higher and higher, moving towards the shore. Something seemed to be prodding him from below, and Sashuk gripped the edges of the belt frantically.

"Hey, there!" Zhorka shouted. "One ruff coming up to get salted!"

His mother was shouting something as she ran alongside, but Sashuk was too high. She could not reach him. Now he was higher than Ivan Danilovich and getting higher all the time. He wanted to crawl back down, but he was now so far from the pier, everything was so empty and frightening below and it was so far to the ground that Sashuk hunched over and shut his eyes tight. Someone lifted him, took him off the belt and set him down in a puddle on the cement floor. Only then did he open his eyes.

"What do you think you're doing, riding the belt!" a strange man with a big moustache said and smacked Sashuk on the behind. It wasn't a hard slap, but Sashuk was offended. After all, it hadn't been his idea.

He ran out of the door that was as wide as a gate. He could see Zhorka shouting to him and waving from the pier below, but he turned and headed home.

Each spring, as soon as Sashuk began going barefoot, his feet would become scratched and bruised. In time he would get used to it. He had quite forgotten about the sores by now. However the puddle on the cement floor had been salty, and his feet began to smart and burn. Sashuk made for the tap in the yard. Raising his feet high, he washed the cracked skin gingerly. The sores did not hurt as much now, though they had become red and swollen.

"I told you to keep away from that bandit," his mother said, returning with a full basket of fish which she dumped on the outdoor table. Then she began cleaning the fish. "He'll get you into trouble, mark my words."

Sashuk scowled but said nothing.

The fishermen were returning from the pier. Splashing and grunting, they washed under the tap and took their seats around the table.

"Hey, Boatswain, chow's on!" Zhorka called to Sashuk. Sashuk pretended not to hear and took a seat beside his father, as far away from Zhorka as possible.

They ate slowly and with relish, for they were relaxing. Then they began drifting off and smoking. Sashuk had had so much rich gruel and flounder that he was too lazy to get up. The puppy was goggle-eyed from overeating, too, and was stretched out with his tongue lolling and his stuffed belly bulging.

"I see you brought him along after all," Ignat said. "What you need is a good thrashing."

"What for?" Zhorka asked.

"So he won't drag a dog around after him. A child shouldn't be allowed to have his way. And a dog should be chained, so it'll be mean."

"Ever been chained yourself?"

"There's no need for me to be. They know who to chain."

Zhorka turned red. Then the blood drained from his face and the veins bulged on his neck. However, he controlled himself and said after a pause, "All right. Let's say that I didn't understand you this time. But don't be too sure of yourself. You might be jailed yet. For being greedy. There's enough greed in you for all of us."

"Don't you preach to me. Watch your own step." Ignat rose and headed towards the house.

"The old miser!" Zhorka muttered. "So the puppy's in his way! What's his name?"

"Puppy," Sashuk said reluctantly. He had decided not to have anything more to do with Zhorka, but how could he not reply, when Zhorka had stood up for his dog.

"Hm. All puppies are called puppies. He has to have a name of his own, one that's just his. Look at him. He's eaten so much his stomach is as curved as a beam."

"What's a beam?"

"Beams are the planks that hold up the deck of a ship." Zhorka snapped his fingers. "Hey, Beam! Come here, boy!"

The puppy got up and waddled over to him, dragging his stomach through the dust.

"What d'you know! He understood me straight off!" Zhorka was smiling as he rubbed the puppy's back.

Beam rolled over on his back, offering Zhorka his bloated belly, with the pink skin visible through the fine white hair.

"Hey," Sashuk said, picking him up, "don't boss him around."

He headed towards the sea again and sat down by the cliff. Beam curled up beside him. The wind ruffled the glittering surface. The waves by the shore became big, they hissed and foamed, and spread out flat on the sand. Gulls glided silently overhead on their outstretched wings, then turned and flew back, as if on patrol. Every now and then one of them would drop to the water like a stone and immediately soar up again with a fish in its beak. The gull

would swallow it in the air and then begin its leisurely patrolling again.

All of a sudden a large gull snatched a fish from a small gull. The smaller bird began to screech. In a moment all the gulls were screaming, as if they, too, were angry at the thief.

"Why are you sitting here? Let's go swimming."

Red-headed Zhorka had come up softly and stopped behind him.

Sashuk turned to look at him and then turned away.

"I won't go anyplace with you."

"Why not?" Zhorka sat down beside him. "Are you still mad about your ride? Don't be angry. There's a saying that you get a lot of work out of an angry man. Come on."

"I don't want to. And my ma doesn't want me to be with you."

"Why not?"

"'Cause she says you're a bandit."

Zhorka got red in the face again and then turned pale. A muscle twitched in his cheek, as if he had something in his mouth.

"She's a fool," he said after a pause.

"She isn't no fool!" Sashuk shouted.

"You're right. That's no way to speak about your ma. But she's wrong when she says things like that."

"No, she isn't! She said you were in jail."

"Well, I was."

"See? That means it's true. Why do they put people in jail?"

"For different reasons. For stealing, and other things."

"Why'd they put you in jail?"

"For being a fool. I socked my chief."

"Why?"

"He was a lousy rat. He liked to show everybody who was boss. There were mostly women working there, and you know what they're like. They'll never speak up for themselves. So I spoke up for them. We had an argument, and when I get real mad I lose control of myself. So I socked him. With a roomful of people looking on. But that was long ago."

"Where's that rat now?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's still a big chief someplace. To hell with him! Let's go swimming. I'm hot."

"Uh-uh. Uncle Semyon said there's no bottom here."

"What do you mean? There's a bottom everyplace. Are you sure you know how to swim?"

"Sure. But I'm scared if there's no bottom."

"Well, there is. Come on. I'll show you where it is."

Not far from the pier the cliff turned into a gentle slope. They ran down the slope to the water, with their feet sliding out from under them in the scorching sand. Beam rolled down after them and then stood at the bottom, shaking his head and sneezing.

Night Patrol

"There's the bottom. See?" Zhorka said, taking off his shirt.

"What about there?" Sashuk said, pointing far out.

"There's a bottom there, too, but it's very deep. You can't swim out that far or you'll drown."

"What's that? I didn't know you could draw on people."

There was a blue tattoo on Zhorka's chest. It was a picture of the Ace of Diamonds, a bottle and a woman's leg, and the words "Our undoing" were tattooed over them.

"That's foolishness. They only draw on fools."

"Are you a fool?"

"I was. With maybe a bit left over now, too."

He got a running start, dived in and stayed under the water for so long that Sashuk began to wonder whether he hadn't drowned after all.

"Come on, Boatswain!" Zhorka shouted, surfacing and blowing air. "Come on in!"

Sashuk breathed in as deeply as he could, puffing out his cheeks as he filled his lungs with air. Then he put his palms together near his face, dived and . . . sailed across the sand on his belly in the shallow water. Zhorka laughed.

"Silly! What's the good of ploughing up the sand?"

"It's not my fault the water's so low."

"You're a hard fellow to please. First you said it was too deep and now it's too shallow." Zhorka swam up to him, stood up and then bent over. "Come on, climb up on my shoulders."

Sashuk scrambled up and clutched Zhorka's red hair. Then Zhorka stooped up straight. Sashuk felt giddy from being so high, for Zhorka was only a bit shorter than Ivan Danilovich.

"Ready? Allez-ooop!"

Sashuk hadn't time to put his palms together and so sailed through the air like a frog and then did a belly-flop.

"How's that?"

"Wow! Here, Beam!"

Beam stood at the water's edge, backing away from each new wave and barking. Sashuk caught him, picked him up and carried him in. Beam whined and tried to struggle free. When the water was up to Sashuk's chest he let the puppy go. Beam got a mouthful of water, coughed and set out for the shore, paddling as fast as he could. Sashuk walked along beside him, laughing happily. Once out of the water, Beam shook his head, making his drooping ears slap against his jowls like wet rags.

"It's better swimming here than back home on the Yalpuh," Sashuk said, flopping down on the sand to catch his breath.

"That's because salt water holds you up better."

"Why doesn't anyone else go swimming? Why don't our fishermen?"

"Because they're old and they don't feel like swimming any more."

"But you're old, too."

"Not that old. I'm only thirty-two. Come on. We've been away so long your ma'll have everyone out looking for you."

They climbed the slope slowly.

"What's over there?" Sashuk asked, pointing towards the latticed tower with the birdhouse on top.

"That's a coastguard lookout. The coastguards are in there guarding the border."

"So spies won't get through?"

"Yep."

"Let's go have a look."

"What's there to look at? Besides, if they spot us they'll only chase us away."

"Let's go at night. Then they won't spot us."

"People are supposed to sleep at night, fellow."

"What's over there?"

"That used to be a German pillbox."

The ruins of the pillbox were near the cliff. Mangled iron rods and beams stuck out of the remains of the concrete walls. Broken bits and chips of concrete were covered with soil and overgrown with weeds. Sashuk tried to embrace a part of the wall but it was too wide for his arms. Caved-in, overgrown trenches snaked from the pillbox towards the edge of the cliff.

"Maybe there are still some bullets here," Sashuk said hopefully. "Let's look, huh?"

"Sure, they've been lying around for twenty years, waiting for you. There's your ma coming. I'll bet she'll rip into you worse'n a bullet."

His mother was walking very quickly towards them. She didn't look at Zhorka at all, as if he wasn't even there, but slapped Sashuk, grabbed him by the hand and dragged him off towards the house. When Zhorka was out of earshot she hissed angrily, "How many times have I told you to keep away from that bandit!"

"He's no bandit, Ma. He told me himself. Ow! Quit hitting me! If you're going to fight they'll put you in jail, too."

"Just you wait!"

Sashuk wriggled out of her grip and was off.

"Go on, but remember, you have to come home some time!"

His mother's threat did not really scare him, for Sashuk knew she never could be angry for long.

Indeed, she soon forgot about it, for when Sashuk came running home for lunch she never said a word to him. After lunch she washed the dishes and then began wiping them. Sashuk sat down in the shade near the porch. Beam lay down beside him and was

soon fast asleep. Sashuk felt sleepy after a filling lunch and he was about to doze off when Zhorka came out of the house. He stood on the porch, but did not notice Sashuk. Instead, he headed straight for Nastya. She glanced at him and dropped her eyes to the dishes.

"Listen, Nastya."

She turned her face a bit, but still did not look at him.

"Why are you trying to keep the boy away from me?"

"You're no one to be a friend of his."

"There's no friends for him here at all. Nothing but old fat-heads."

"Maybe they're that, but they're not tainted."

"And you think I am? Do you think I murdered somebody, or stole something?"

"I don't know what you did," Nastya said, rubbing a bowl with the towel so angrily you'd think she wanted to make a hole in it.

"Why don't you try asking me?"

"It's none of my business. I've no need to ask you."

"Then why do you say I'm a bandit and jailbird?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"All right, so I was in jail. But you know why? Because I stood up for some foolish women like you."

Nastya kept on polishing the bowl. After a while she said, "You can invent anything, you know."

"Ah, what's the use! Some day try to see the person behind the label." He turned and went back into the house, his eyes on the ground, while Nastya gazed after him sullenly.

"Why don't you like him?" Sashuk said. "He's. . ."

"Shush!" his mother shouted and swung the towel at him. "I forgot to ask you. . ."

At dusk the fishermen set out to sea again. Sashuk and Beam saw them off at the pier and then sat there watching until the boats had become specks on the horizon. Then Sashuk whistled to Beam and the two of them set off for the ruins of the pillbox. After all, how could Zhorka be so sure? Maybe something was left there

and nobody had found it, but he would. The boys back home would die of envy.

No matter how he searched, however, he could find nothing. The whole place was covered with nettles, sea grass, concrete chips and scorching dust. He got all scratched for nothing. Then he began playing war. He crouched in the caved-in trench and manned a machine-gun against the nazis, Rat-tat-tat! But it was no fun playing all by himself. Besides, Beam was a nuisance. He darted back and forth and didn't understand Sashuk's orders. When Sashuk crawled along on his belly Beam would bark and snap at his bare heels. No, you couldn't go on reconnaissance with Beam.

Sashuk decided to go to the coastguard tower and started off at a run, but soon slowed down and then stopped. A horse was tied up by the ladder that led to the cabin on top. It was shifting its weight and switching its tail. What if they'd already caught someone? He was dying to come up close and have a good look at everything, but he knew they'd chase him away. If only the sun weren't shining so brightly he might creep up unobserved, but although the sun was low in the sky, it was as bright as day, and the countryside was as bare as the palm of your hand, with no place to hide. They'd spot him from afar and would certainly shoo him off.

Grown-ups always thought they were the only ones who could be interested in everything and children didn't have to know anything.

Sashuk trudged off towards home. He wanted to wait up for the fishermen, but his mother made him have supper. Then he fed Beam and finally began to nod. He awoke in the middle of the night.

The fishermen were snoring loudly behind the partition. His parents were asleep. Beam, too, was sound asleep by the door. The moon peeped in, on a level with the window. Sashuk slipped off the bed and tiptoed towards the door. Beam had tried to curl up, but his stuffed belly was in the way and so he had stretched out on his side with his paws straight out.

Sashuk stopped on the porch. The moon, not at all like the moon back home in Nekrasovka, was strangely huge and reddish and

hung suspended over the horizon. He could see things both near and far quite clearly, but they did not appear as in the daytime. Everything was eerie and mournful. The coastguard tower was a black pole among the scattered stars.

What if he were to go over now and watch them catch spies? Sashuk had played at catching spies back home in the marshes. It was really hard work, especially when the boys hid in the reeds. But that was make-believe.

He walked along cautiously, listening to every sound. There was snoring coming from the house. Ivan Danilovich always snored loudly and evenly, like a tractor with the motor running. Sashuk continued on his way. His feet sank in the warm dust and his steps were soundless. He darted under the pole fence and ran towards the tower, reaching the pillbox and the trenches a short while later. He slowed down and looked around. Sashuk wasn't the least bit frightened, but still, it was scary. There were dead nazis there, killed during the war. They were harmless enough in the daytime, but there was no knowing what they might do at night.

Somewheres nearby a cicada chirred shrilly. Sashuk stopped. All was still. The mounds near the pillbox were silent. Suddenly he saw twisted arms rising from the ground. His heart stopped, his body went cold. Just as he was about to scream and run he remembered seeing them in the daytime. No, these were not arms, they were only mangled iron beams. He heaved a sigh. It was silly to be so jumpy. The nazis who were killed here were buried someplace else, which meant there were no corpses here now.

Still looking round warily, he stole by the pillbox with shivers running down his back and his breath coming in fits and starts. Once past the place he broke into a run. He would soon reach the tower. Only a sliver of the blood-red moon could be seen from behind the hill. It melted and then disappeared, making everything suddenly pitch-black. He raced on until he bumped into the ladder leading up the tower and clutched it for support. A dead silence lay over everything. He could make out the nettles nearby, but nothing else, neither the house nor the pillbox. Someone was prob-

ably inside the watchtower. But what if no one was there? He listened, but could not hear a sound.

All at once he realised what he had done. There he was, all alone in the black, deserted steppe. Not a soul anywhere, with the ruins of the pillbox and the trenches full of corpses lying between him and the house and his sleeping parents. Clutching the rungs of the ladder, he whimpered softly, like Beam usually did.

The ladder creaked under someone's heavy tread. Then someone touched his shoulder. "Why are you here, boy? Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," Sashuk said and sobbed.

"Why'd you come here? Where's your mother? Hm? You go on back home to her."

Sashuk glanced back at the terrible blackness that lay between him and home and shook his head wildly.

"What's the matter, Hakim?" someone called from above.

"There's a little boy here and he's crying."

"Where's he from?"

"Don't know."

"Bring him up."

Hakim picked Sashuk up and carried him up the ladder. A blinding beam of light hit him in the face.

"Where'd you come from?"

Sashuk blinked in the bright light.

"Over there," he said, waving. "My ma's there. And my dad. And the fishermen."

"Why'd you come here?"

"To see what it's like."

"This is no place for you. Go on back home."

"No. It's dark. I'm scared." He backed away till he felt the wall behind him.

"Weren't you scared coming here? You go right back the way you came."

"Ha! The moon was out then."

"Well, no outsiders are supposed to be here. Understand?" The soldier spoke in a very stern voice. Sashuk sobbed.

"This is no place for a cry-baby," the soldier said in a still sterner voice. "You've come to a coastguard post and you're bawling. What kind of a soldier will you be?"

"I'm not a soldier yet."

"If you get used to bawling when you're little you'll be a mess when you grow up. Stop it!"

"I'm n-not c-crying any m-m-more."

"And that's no way to answer, either. Stand up straight and speak clearly."

"All right. But don't make me go. I won't touch anything. And I won't get in the way."

"Let him stay, huh?" Hakim said.

"It's against regulations. And his parents will see he's gone and have the place in an uproar."

"But I'm not lost. I'm here!"

"All right. Go sit over there. I'll bet your dad will polish your behind when you get back."

"No. He'll box my ears."

"That's another good way of getting sense into you."

The cabin was very small and had nothing inside except a bench. It also had a door and three windows. Nothing of interest at all. The soldiers stood by the windows and looked out. Sashuk got up, tiptoed over and also looked out, but saw nothing. Everything was pitch-black, with only the stars twinkling in the sky. Suddenly, the darkness exploded to the right of them. A shimmering blue column of light shot up, then moved downwards, picking out the blue cliff and the clumps of grass growing on it as clearly as if they were close by. Then it moved on to the distant pier. The conveyor belt darted out of the darkness, as did the team's house, which seemed light-blue and flashed its many windows.

"What's that?"

"A searchlight."

"It can see everything, can't it?"

"It lights everything up. We're the ones who can see."

The piercing, shimmering column of light, having skimmed over the shore, hurried on. Now the glittering waves were reflected in

its light. The bright column hurried on and then suddenly disappeared. Sashuk's eyes imagined a shimmering black column over the sea in the place where it had been. The soldiers lowered their binoculars.

"It's easy to catch a spy here. You have a searchlight and you can see everything. And there aren't any marshes. The reeds are so big on the Yalpuh back home that if anyone's hiding there you'll never find him."

"We can find a man in the reeds, too."

"If you have a dog, maybe," Sashuk said doubtfully. "We've got a watchtower back home, too. But there aren't any coastguards in it. Nobody but Old Man Tarasych. He has a real big gun. Much bigger than yours. If anybody gets into the vineyard he shoots it off. Bang! It's loaded with blanks."

"Does anyone try to get into the vineyard?"

"Sure."

"You too?"

"Uh-huh," Sashuk said after a pause.

"Stealing's not nice."

"I know. But you know how good the grapes are? The boys all go, and I go along with them."

"Doesn't your mother ever give you any grapes?"

"Sure, but that's no fun. How long more do we have to wait?"

"What for?"

"Till the spies try to sneak by."

The soldiers laughed.

"They don't usually tell us beforehand."

"Will you shoot when they do?"

"We'll see."

"Can I shoot once? Or maybe just hold your gun?"

"A submachine gun's no toy. Besides, we're not supposed to talk when we're on duty. Since you're a temporary soldier, you'll have to obey orders. Sit down and keep a watch on things. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Hop to it."

Sashuk stared out the window, but no matter how hard he looked he could make out nothing but the stars and their faint reflection in the sea. It was boring to stare into the dark, and after a while he nodded several times. Finally, he moved closer to the wall and leaned against it for support.

"That takes care of that," Hakim said. "The soldier sleeps, while the hours roll on, as they say."

"I'm not sleeping," Sashuk mumbled.

How could he be sleeping? It was just very, very dark. Even the stars were going out. And he couldn't see the soldiers. But he could hear them talking, and that meant he wasn't asleep. He felt as if he were awake and dreaming. The soldiers walked back and forth from one window to another, looking out, and Sashuk walked back and forth and looked out, too. Then the other soldier suddenly stopped by him and said, "How can you be a soldier if you don't have a gun? Here!" and he took off his submachine gun and put the strap around Sashuk's neck.

"Is it for keeps?" Sashuk asked, his heart skipping a beat.

"Sure."

He clutched his gun. He'd show those spies a thing or two if they tried to sneak by.

"Look, they've put the lights on in the fishermen's house and they're running around with lanterns."

"Go have a look and see what's up. And take the kid along, Hakim. This is no place for him to be sleeping."

Sashuk felt he was drifting in a boat, not moving, but swaying. Then he heard a shout. Somebody grabbed him up and pressed him so tightly it hurt.

He was in his mother's arms, with Ivan Danilovich, Ignat and Zhorka bending over him.

They were all holding lanterns.

"Hey, Fyodor!" Zhorka shouted. "Stop looking. We've found him!"

"You rascal!" Ivan Danilovich scolded. "We've all had a hard day and now we have to spend half the night running around, looking for you!"

"That's what comes of spoiling the boy," Ignat muttered. "He never should have been taken along, in the first place."

His father came running up from the darkness, "Wait till I get my hands on you!" he shouted from afar.

"Take it easy, Fyodor!" Ivan Danilovich shouted back. "It's the middle of the night. The men have to get some sleep. Thanks, soldier," he said to Hakim.

"Nothing to worry about now," Hakim replied.

"We thought he'd drowned or something. Where did you find him?"

"He came over to the tower. Said he wanted to be a coastguard."

"His dad'll change his mind about that quick enough."

Nastya took her son home and put him to bed. Sashuk buried his head in the pillow and wept bitterly. Not because he was afraid he'd get a spanking in the morning, but because he was heart-broken about the submachine gun having only been a dream.

The Stargazer

Sashuk's ears burned from shame, because the fishermen had made fun of him. Today was Sunday, their day off, and they had sat around the breakfast table for a long time, talking about everything under the sun until they had finally begun drifting off. His parents had gone to the neighbouring town to do some shopping, but since it was quite a distance, they had to taken him along.

Sashuk and Beam ran around and played in the yard until their tongues were hanging out from the heat and from exhaustion. Then they followed the fishermen to the local shop down the road. Farther on were the first cottages of Balabanovka. There were two reasons why Sashuk never went there. In the first place his mother wouldn't let him. Then, he had seen how big the boys and the dogs were there and was afraid they'd bully Beam, and maybe him, too.

"Hey, there, Boatswain!" Zhorka called in a very friendly voice. "Tell me about your visit to the coastguards last night. Weren't you scared?"

"Nope. I wasn't even scared of the corpses."

"Which corpses?"

"Uh, the nazis. The ones in the pillbox."

"Did you see any?"

"Sure!" By now he actually believed he had seen the dead nazis and was anxious to tell the others about it, but the fishermen all burst out laughing. He stopped speaking.

"If that's what, I won't tell you," he said in a huff. "C'mon, Beam."

Zhorka was beside him in a second. "Quit pouting. It's no skin off your back if they laughed. Come on, I have a present put away for you. I wanted to give it to you this morning, but you were still asleep."

Sashuk said nothing. At first, still feeling hurt, he was going to say that he didn't want any presents from people who made fun of him. But he was dying to know what it was, and so said nothing. He could always say it if the present turned out to be bad.

Back in the fishermen's house Ignat was bent over his open chest. "Counting your millions?" Zhorka called out.

Ignat did not reply. He turned quickly, blocking their view of the open chest. Zhorka looked under his cot, then scratched his head. "Oh! I remember now. I hid it in the yard."

They went over to the pile of torn old nets in the corner of the yard and Zhorka pulled a glass ball encased in a small net from under it. The ball was huge, as big as Sashuk's head, and perhaps even bigger. He was astounded. Carefully he took it from Zhorka's hands. It was scratchy and covered with periwinkles, and the hardened net was stuck to the glass. The ball gave off a strong smell of salt and the sea.

"Well? Like it?"

"Boy! What is it?"

"It's a glass float. They're used for holding up fishing nets."

"Where'd you get it?"

"It was tossed up on the shore. If we could find another one we could tie them together and they'd make you a fine pair of water wings. You could swim way out with them."

"Even way out deep?"

"Anyplace."

Zhorka then went off to "catch forty winks", while Sashuk carried the float gently over to the outdoor table. He set it down on the table and examined it closely. The glass was very thick and greenish. Was it always that colour, or had it become green from being in the sea? Maybe there was something inside it? But it was difficult to make out anything inside, because the net was very fine and was encrusted with shells. They were stuck so fast it was impossible to pry them off. He broke a fingernail trying.

Ignat came out onto the porch. He walked over, picked up the float and studied it. "A useless thing. Although, if you cut it in half, it'll make two bowls."

"Give it back. I don't need any bowls. I need a float. I'm going to use it when I go swimming."

"It's nothing but tomfoolery. You're growing up like a weed, with no one to take you in hand."

"That's because you're stingy and greedy."

"Who told you to say that?"

"Nobody. Zhorka says you're mean and tightfisted."

Sashuk carried the float into the house, pushed it under his bed and covered it with a rag to make sure no one would find it. Now what was he to do? His parents would not be back for a long time, and nothing would change much when they did return, anyway. His mother would start cooking, and his father would go off to join the other fishermen. Should he join them, too? No, they'd only laugh at him again. It would be fun to go swimming with Zhorka again, to climb up on his shoulders and dive into the water. It was scary, but fun. However, Zhorka was snoring loudly behind the partition and he couldn't very well wake him up.

Sashuk wandered down to the pier. The factory was closed, the conveyor belt was motionless, and the wooden boxes were empty.

The boats that were tied up to the pier rocked on the waves and knocked against the piles. It would be nice to jump down into one of them and rock in it, but Sashuk was afraid he wouldn't jump that far and would miss. There wasn't a soul on the strip of the beach along the bottom of the cliff. Even the gulls had disappeared. Suddenly, Sashuk jumped at the thought that the tide might have tossed another glass float up on the beach. If Zhorka had found one, maybe he'd be lucky, too.

His feet sank in the sand. The sun-baked clay of the cliff gave off waves of heat. He turned towards the high-tide line. The wet surf was firm, with warm waves washing over his feet every now and then. Sashuk peered at everything they had cast up on the shore, but there was nothing of interest, only brown seaweed and bits of junk.

He would have been awfully bored if not for the small jellyfish which were tossed towards the shore every now and then, and which he kicked back into the water. Zhorka had pointed out the ones that stung and the ones that did not, and so he was not afraid of them any more.

When he drew abreast of the coastguard tower he threw back his head and looked up intently, but could see no one. Perhaps the soldiers were hiding. Or maybe they never came here in the daytime.

The shore made a sharp turn here. The pier, which had become very small, disappeared from view behind the cliff. Sashuk was tired, but trudged on stubbornly. He still hoped he'd find something of interest, even if he didn't find a float.

And he did. A large crab was lying on its back on the dry sand with its claws spread wide and its pale stomach offered up to the sun. Sashuk had only seen live crabs on the pier when they had edged along sideways, trying to sneak out of the pile of fish. The fishermen had snatched them up and tossed them back into the water. This one, however, was lying very still. It did not even twitch when Sashuk tossed a handful of dry seaweed at it. He prodded it with a stick and then turned it over. There had been bugs under it and now they scattered. Sashuk picked the crab up

gingerly and dipped it in the water. But it did not come to life, it did not move a single joint. It was a huge crab, bigger than his palm. The claws looked as if they'd easily nip off your hand. He was about to toss it back when he suddenly changed his mind. If he dried it out real good and brought it back to Nekrasovka in a box... well! He placed the crab inside his shirt carefully and turned back.

He saw a man beyond the bend, halfway to the pier. He was funny-looking and had on shorts, a loud shirt, a straw hat with a fringed brim and a pair of sunglasses. His face was young, but a short beard covered his cheeks and the edge of his chin. He was holding a fishing rod and staring at the float so intensely he did not notice Sashuk come up to him, stop and then sit down behind. The float bobbed on the waves and suddenly sank. The man jerked at his rod. A tiny crab fell off the hook and plopped back into the water.

"Thieves. Robbers. Sea-gangsters," the man muttered as he examined the bare hook, but there was no real anger in his voice. "Riff-raff, that's what you are."

He turned to the bait can behind him and noticed Sashuk.

"I didn't know I had an audience. Whither hast thou come from, lovely child with peeling nose?"

"That's from the sun," Sashuk explained, touching his sore nose.

"Undoubtedly," the man mumbled, poking about in the can. "Young man!"

"You mean me?"

"Whom else? Of the two of us you are certainly the younger. And just as certainly, you are a native. The underwater robbers have gobbled up all my bait. Do you know where I can dig some more worms?"

"You don't have to dig them. They're everywhere."

"Please explain."

"See?" Sashuk got on his knees and began tossing aside handfuls of wet sand, uncovering several red worms with a golden cast, in the process.

"Oho! I see you are well informed on the subject."

"See? Here's some more," Sashuk said, digging in another spot. "There's thousands of them here."

"I would say even more than that. Thanks for the lesson. Now I won't have to dig in any more manure heaps."

"Did you catch anything yet?"

"Nothing to brag about. I caught a rather strange creature, but it looks so poisonous I don't even think our landlady's cat will touch it." He pulled a string from the water and held it up.

"It's all right. The cat'll eat it."

"Well, then, my labours have not been in vain. Shall we continue?" he said, casting his line. "Who are you and where are you from?"

"I'm not from anyplace. I live here."

"Indeed," the man said and pulled up the line. The hook was bare again. "How are things here in general?"

"Fine."

"What's fine?"

"Everything's fine," Sashuk replied, not quite understanding what was expected of him.

"We shall see," the man mumbled, busy baiting his hook.

Sashuk finally got up the courage to ask, "Why do you have a beard?"

"Is it that bad?"

"No. But men who have beards all have long pants."

"Indeed?"

The man glanced at his shorts. "I didn't take that into consideration. But I must have a beard, you see. All stargazers in the world had mutton chops, goatees or beards, so I grew one, too. It makes me look dignified and wise, and it's for beauty's sake, too."

"Are you a stargazer?"

"Not exactly, but something like one. There's a science called astrophysics. Ever hear of it? No, you're too young for that. Ever hear about outer space?"

"Sure. That's where Gagarin was."

"Well, now. Gagarin was much, much closer to the Earth, if I

may put it that way. I am interested in things that are much further away."

"Here?"

"No, not here. I've brought my family here so that they can splash about in the sea. There they are, frying in the sun."

In the distance someone was lying under a tent made of a sheet. Sashuk glanced in the direction, but he was not interested in the man's family. He moved closer to the angler, for it was not every day that one met a real, live stargazer.

Anya

"How do you count them? The stars, I mean?"

"I don't count them, I study them. All the stars have already been counted and registered."

"Every single one?"

"Every single one. As far as science is able, that is."

Sashuk looked up at him doubtfully, but the sunglasses shielded the man's eyes and it was difficult to say whether he was fooling or not. Sashuk sat there thinking for a while and then finally asked the angler a question that he had wondered about on and off. "Is it true that every person has his own star? And when he's born that star begins to shine? And when he dies the star falls?"

"That's a lot of nonsense. Stars don't fall. What we see falling is stardust, which is cosmic rubbish. Besides, there are many more stars than people in the world, and the stars don't care a bit about us. Now, figuratively speaking, one might say that each person has his own star. Or, at any rate, should have his own star."

"Me, too?"

"You, too. You're just as good as anybody else."

"Where is it? Will you show me?"

"By no means. Each person must find his own star."

"How?"

"Let me see. How shall I explain it? The main thing is never to be lazy. For a start, it's a good thing to get up early each morning."

"Before dawn?"

"Nothing could be better."

"But I like to sleep."

"That's just it. Laziness makes you want to sleep. There are people who'll not only miss their star, they'll even sleep through their lives. And our life, unfortunately, is very short."

"If I get up early, will I see it right away?"

"Maybe not right away, but you'll find it sooner or later."

"And then?"

"What then?"

"What will happen when I find it?"

"Well . . . you'll know where to go, and what to do. At this rate my dear daughter will scare all the fish away."

A girl in a blue dress and white sun bonnet was running towards them along the edge of the water, raising up streams of spray.

"Daddy! Did you catch a lot, Daddy?" she shouted, then noticed Sashuk and slowed down to a walk, advancing leisurely and even pompously, pretending she had not noticed him.

"Don't act like a grand dame," her father said. "See, even on this deserted shore there's a Don Juan for you," and he pointed at Sashuk.

"My name's not Don. It's Sashuk."

"Indeed!" the man exclaimed. "I would like you to meet Anya."

The girl snapped her elastic hatband as she stared at Sashuk. The elastic made a loud sound when it hit her chin. Then she offered him her hand and said, "Hello."

Sashuk sat very still, cocking an eye first at her hand, then at Anya. He had never seen a girl like her before. She seemed to be from another world. He did not know what to do or how to act and therefore sat very still and stared at her.

Anya grimaced, shrugged and snapped her hatband again.

"I can't say you're very polite in the company of young ladies," her father said.

Anya laughed, making her short nose crinkle. Sashuk couldn't see what was funny, yet he turned red. At first, he wanted to say that he didn't play with girls, but the words would not come.

Maybe it was because she wasn't at all like the loud, bossy girls in Nekrasovka? Why was her skin so white? Her mother must certainly use a lot of soap on her.

Still, he did not know how to act and became even redder. Then he suddenly remembered his find, stuck his hand into his shirt and pulled it out. "Here. Want it?"

Anya took a step backwards. Her grey-blue eyes became very round as she said, "What's that?"

"A crab. Go on, take it. It won't bite. It's dead."

"I don't want it," she said, hiding her hands behind her. "It smells awful."

"So what? It'll stink for a while and then it'll stop."

"Crabs aren't like that. They come in cans."

"Shame on you," her father said. He wasn't looking in their direction but he had heard every word. "The ones in cans are cooked. This one is right from the sea. It's up to you, naturally, but I would take it. It's a very valuable find."

Anya looked at her father, then took the crab gingerly with her thumb and forefinger.

"Go and play, children," her father said. "You'll kill two birds with one stone: you'll get to know each other better and you'll relieve me of my duties as a pedagogue."

"What did he mean?" Sashuk asked as they walked off.

"Don't pay any attention to that. Daddy often speaks strangely." She was beginning to like the crab, and the smell did not bother her any more. She examined the prickly monster closely. Then she stared at Sashuk just as intently. "Don't you ever wear a hat?" she asked, pointing to his sun-bleached hair. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"Why?"

"The sun's no good for me. I'm frail," she said and sighed.

"Don't worry, you won't melt."

Anya hesitated, then pulled back her hat so that it hung suspended round her neck on the elastic band. The wind ruffled her blonde curls. "Come on. I want to show it to my mother," she said. They ran along the wet sand. Sashuk tried to step on each wave

as it crested, for that made the biggest splash. Anya liked the game and ran ahead of him, shouting that her splashes were bigger. Sashuk was more expert than she, so that the spray that flew out from under his feet was higher and went farther. They raced on, splashing and shrieking until a shout brought them up short.

"What's going on?" a woman was peering out from under a sheet that had been stretched on poles to make an awning. At first Sashuk thought she was quite naked, but then he noticed two strips of bright cloth across her body and a towel wound round her head. A large pair of sunglasses covered her eyes, a piece of paper covered her nose, something white was smeared all over her face and her lipstick was blood-red.

"Mamma!" Anya cried. "Look what I have!"

"Where'd you find that rotten mess?" her mother snapped. She grabbed the crab and tossed it away.

It hit against the clay wall of the cliff. Its claws came off as it fell to the sand. Anya was horror-stricken, but her mother went right on. "Why did you take off your bonnet? Have a look at yourself! For shame. You're a big girl, but you're wetter than a baby. Come here!" She lowered her voice, but Sashuk could hear her clearly. "Why'd you bring this filthy boy along? There's something wrong with him. Look at the sores on his nose. You might catch some terrible sickness from him."

"He's not filthy," Anya protested. "And he was talking to Daddy."

Sashuk didn't wait to hear any more. He turned, stuck his fists into his pockets and stalked off. His ears were burning again, but this time it was because he had been insulted. He kicked at the waves angrily now and felt no pleasure at the fountains of spray he raised. Ever new waves kept rolling up onto the beach no matter how hard he kicked at them. What really mattered, though, was that this didn't bother the woman in any way. She'd smeared her face up like a scarecrow. He could climb to the top of the cliff and break off a big chunk and throw it down on her. That would sure wipe the mess off her face. Or he could get a big jellyfish and stick

it down her dress. Only she didn't have on a dress. Well, he could drop it down the rag she had on her chest.

It was a hot day with a faint breeze blowing and there were hundreds of jellyfish in the surf. There were little ones and big ones, as big as plates, and huge ones with fringed edges that looked like overturned buckets. Sashuk waded into the water, grabbed a slippery, bucket-like jellyfish and lugged it onto the sand. It fell apart.

The whitish jelly of its body oozed water. He scooped up another and yet another. The pile of jelly was quite enough to completely cover the hateful woman, but he kept on pulling ever new victims onto the sand.

"What're you doing that for?" Anya was standing beside him, snapping her elastic.

"She said not to play with me, so go 'way," Sashuk muttered.

"But I want to. You're mad at her, aren't you? Don't pay any attention to what she said. Daddy says she has many petty ways and mannerisms," Anya explained, speaking just like a grown-up. "After all, we all have our shortcomings. You're not perfect either, you know."

Sashuk had never thought about that before. Now, however, try as he would, he could not find anything about himself that seemed wrong, and so he continued pulling jellyfish out of the sea in silence.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Cook soup and feed it to fancy ladies," Sashuk replied, trying to sound as unpleasant as he could. Anya paid no attention to the insult and waded into the water. She grabbed a little jellyfish but dropped it the moment she touched it. "Ooh! It's gooey!"

"Are you scared?" Sashuk taunted. "Go on back to your mamma. What're you hanging around here for?"

"She's sleeping," Anya said, reaching for a big pink jellyfish with a purple fringe.

"Don't touch it! It stings!" Sashuk shouted, but he was too late.

Anya yanked away her burning hand. She was both scared and hurt.

"I told you not to touch it. It stings worse'n nettles. Does it hurt?"

"It burns," Anya whispered. Her short nose was crinkled again, but this time by the tears that brimmed up, not by laughter. She stuck her burning hand between her knees and blinked rapidly to chase the tears away.

"That's nothing," Sashuk said, trying to console her. "The first time one stung me it was much worse. It was all over my stomach!"

This did not make Anya feel any better. Her nose was getting more and more wrinkled and tears now trickled down her cheeks.

"You're awfully tender. A real cry-baby. Aw, to hell with the jellyfish. Let's go over to the pier."

Her hand hurt less and less, and by the time they reached the pier Anya had forgotten all about it. They lay down on the planks on their stomachs and watched the schools of young fish stand motionlessly in the sun-pierced water. Then, becoming suddenly frightened, the fish would dart away like silvery flashes. A little crab was stealthily inching sideways from pile to pile. The transparent shadows of the waves slipped endlessly across the sandy bottom. Sashuk told Anya about the time red-headed Zhorka had put him on the conveyor belt. Anya was amazed. She wanted to ride it, too. They climbed onto the belt, which was motionless. It was slippery and scary to climb up the rubber trough. The pulleys were rarely greased, and sparingly at that, but still Anya managed to get her foot into a blob of black axle grease. She tried to rub it off, but only succeeded in smearing it all over her leg and hands. At first the mess made her laugh. Then she thought of her mother. Sashuk led her over to the wash basin outside their house. Anya soaped her hands thoroughly, but the soap did not wash off the grease. She looked worried. Sashuk tried to console her.

"Come on, I'll show you something!"

She stopped at the open door. A hoarse, grating sound was coming from within.

"Who's moaning?"

"That's Zhorka. He's not moaning. He's sleeping."

"It sounds spooky. Like somebody's killing him."

"Nobody can kill him! You know who he is?" Sashuk's eyes grew big as he whispered, "He's a bandit! He was in jail!"

He was quite ready to make up a really terrible story about Zhorka but saw that he had already gone too far. Anya was looking about in fright, she was ready to flee, and so he quickly added, "Don't be afraid of him. He's all right. I'll show you what he gave me." He darted under his bed and pulled out the glass float.

"Oh! Can I have it?"

"Aren't you smart? I need it myself. As soon as I find another one I'll tie them together like water wings. I'll let you use them, too." After some thought he added, "For a little while."

Beam, who was awakened by the fuss, crawled out from under the bed. Anya immediately forgot about the float.

"Isn't he cute!" She crouched down beside him and scratched his ear. Beam rolled right over on his back so she could scratch his stomach, too. Then he recalled he had things to attend to and tottered over to his dish of water. He lapped up quite a bit of it, went off a few more steps, and then a puddle appeared underneath him.

"Shame on you," Anya said and laughed self-consciously. The flies buzzing on the windowpanes sounded as loud as airplanes, while the terrible snoring never stopped for a moment. "Let's go outside."

"Sure. We can play war. Did you see the pillbox?"

"I don't want to. That's no game."

"Sure it is. It's the best game. I forgot, you're a girl. That's why you don't want to play."

"That's not why at all. I don't like people to be killed. Mamma's daddy was a colonel. And he was killed during the war."

"We won't play for real. Just for fun."

"I still don't want to play!"

"All right. Let's just go over and look at it."

He was positive that the moment she saw the trenches and the ruins she'd forget everything and would be just dying to play war.

However, they were no sooner out of the yard than Sashuk

himself forgot all about the pillbox. He raced headlong to the slope leading to the beach. Something he had dreamed about was standing there.

The Orange Dream

There it was, an orange beauty, a miracle on four wheels bound in glass and chrome. The body glowed, the huge headlights stared at him glassily, the small parking lights followed his every movement, while the gleaming mouth formed by the radiator and bumper gnashed its huge fangs. This wasn't just an automobile. It was the best car in the whole world.

Sashuk walked around it slowly, as in a trance, coming to a stop in front of the radiator. He could not tear his eyes from it. He could see how smooth it was, even under the layer of dust. His hand slipped across it easily. He was reflected in the bumper and the hubcaps, as in a mirror. True, his face was flat and funny-looking, but still, they gleamed brighter than the mirror at home.

"What are you looking at so long? Come on," Anya said.

"Wait a sec." He was annoyed. "Can't you see, it's a Volga." He had never seen a Volga before, but the boys said it was the best car ever.

"It's not a Volga. It's our Moskvich."

"You're lying!"

"Why should I? Besides, I never lie," Anya said in a huff.

"Is it really yours? I mean, does it belong to your family?"

"Of course it does. That's how we got here. This is the third summer my daddy's driven to the seashore in it, but they never took me before. They used to leave me with my grandma."

"Did you come all the way from your house in it?"

"What's so special about that? Mamma wanted to go to a resort, but Daddy said he was sick and tired of resorts and he wanted to go native in the wilds. That's why we came here. But Mamma doesn't like it here. She says there are no conveniences, and besides. . ."

But Sashuk wasn't interested in what she was saying any more. He was staring at her. She looked the same as ever, but something seemed to have changed about her since he had discovered she had arrived in this very car. And the car seemed to have changed somehow, too. It was the same, yet it was different; just as magnificent, but not beyond reach, as a moment before. Sashuk walked around it again, looked inside, touched all the door handles, the rear lights, the headlights, and the radiator grill.

"Come on," Anya said, having become thoroughly bored.

"Wait. You know what? Let's sit inside it before anyone sees us. Just for a little while."

"How can we get inside if it's locked?"

Sashuk heaved a sigh. He could not tear himself away from the car and walked around it as if tied to it by an invisible but very strong rope.

"I know! Let's polish it!"

A thin layer of tan dust all but snuffed out the orange flame of the paint, dimming the glitter of the chrome. Sashuk wanted to see the four-wheeled wonder in all its glory. They had nothing with which to wipe the dust: no rag, no piece of paper, not even a soft clump of grass nearby. Nothing but scratchy nettles. Without a moment's hesitation Sashuk pulled his shirt from his pants, got down on his knees and began rubbing the hubcap with it. The shirt was too short, which meant he had to squirm quite a bit to reach the metal, but soon the chrome began to glitter so it hurt his eyes. Anya felt jealous, so she got down on her knees by another one of the wheels and began rubbing the hubcap with the hem of her dress. Each was trying his best to outdo the other. They neither heard nor saw what was going on.

An angry voice brought them up short. "What do you think you're doing?"

A pair of thin, hairy legs were standing beside Sashuk. Farther up were a pair of shorts, a loud shirt, a beard and sunglasses.

"It's dirty," Sashuk mumbled. "We wanted to. . . ."

"Oh, so you wanted to?" the stargazer said, and the one small fish on a string swung back and forth angrily. "You intended,

were going to and wanted to? And who left dirty fingermarks all over the car?"

Now only did Sashuk notice the streaks and the fans of his handprints wherever he had leaned against the body. There was nothing he could say and so he sniffled guiltily.

"Try to remember this once and for all: a car is not a cat and should not be stroked." It was difficult to decide whether he was speaking seriously or making fun of Sashuk. "Dust is not wiped off. It is washed off. As for you, Anya," he continued, turning towards his daughter, "there's Mother coming towards us, and you are in for a lot of trouble. She's panic-stricken over your disappearance. However, when she sees what you look like. . ."

Anya's light-blue dress was now grey with dust. There were fish scales stuck to it from when they had been on the pier. There were soapy streaks on it which had become muddy streaks. There were also some black smudges of axle grease. Anya smoothed her skirt, but this did not improve her appearance. Meanwhile, her mother was coming quickly towards the car. She was dressed now and had on a reddish-brown dress that glittered and shimmered. She carried the towel that had been wound round her head on her arm. Sashuk saw that she had the same kind of blonde curls as Anya. The piece of paper was no longer stuck on her nose and the white goo had been wiped off her face. She was very beautiful, but she looked so angry that Sashuk sauntered off behind the car without a moment to lose. He stood beside Anya's father, who was now unlocking the front door and reaching for his slacks on the seat. Then he opened the other doors to ventilate the car. It had been standing in the sun and gave off as much heat as a burning oven. The promised trouble was beginning.

"Why did you run away, Anya?" her mother said from a distance. "I forbade you to wander off by yourself. My God! Look at you!" She was shouting now. "Did you do that on purpose? Or were you collecting junk with that filthy boy again?"

"He had nothing to do with it. He didn't get me dirty. I got dirty myself."

Her father made a funny sound, something between a grunt and a chuckle, and Sashuk thought he winked at him but couldn't be sure because of the dark sunglasses.

"Are you trying to find an excuse for him? Don't you even dare go near him again! Hear me? If I ever set eyes on him again. . ."

At this moment she rounded the car and set eyes on Sashuk.

"Oh, so you're here? Well, get out of here! Immediately! And make sure that I never see you again!"

"Lida!" Anya's father said in an undertone. "Don't talk like that. I'm ashamed of you."

"Well, you needn't be. If you have no concern about your child's welfare. . . ."

"But he's a child, too."

"I couldn't care less about other people's snotty children. I've enough to worry about as it is!"

Sashuk hunched over miserably as he walked off. His ears were burning, his eyes stung, and several drops actually fell into the hot, velvety dust. What a mean woman she was, and how he hated her! Why did she always pick on him like that? Anya was the first to come over to him. He hadn't called her. Well, if she ever came over to him again he'd chase her away. And he'd certainly never go over to her. He couldn't care less about the whole bunch of them.

Despite the meanness of the undeserved scolding he found that he could not simply walk off. He just had to see the orange dream begin to move, even if it was from a distance and out of the corner of his eye. After all, she couldn't stop him from looking. The steppe didn't belong to her. Anybody could stand around here if they wanted to. He walked off a bit and sat down on the ground, pretending to be digging up an ant tunnel, while actually keeping an eye on the goings-on near the car. The mean woman yanked off Anya's dress, shook it out and put it back on her. She kept talking all the while, and he knew just what she was saying. She was scolding Anya, telling her what a horrible boy he was. Her father stood there stroking his beard and gazing at the ground for some time. Then turned and headed towards him. Sashuk jumped to his feet. Just in case. He might have to start running quick.

"Are you angry?"

"Why'd she pick on me like that?"

"I know it's not very fair," Anya's father said, tugging at his beard. "Come on."

"What for?"

"Stargazers not only know about the stars, they know how to guess your wishes. I've guessed yours already."

"No, you haven't."

"Yes, I have. Look me in the eye," he said in a stern voice. Then, pointing his finger at Sashuk's chest he said very solemnly, "You want to go for a ride in a car!"

Sashuk's eyes and mouth popped open. At this the man made the same funny sound as before, something between a grunt and a chuckle. Then he turned and headed towards the car. Sashuk jogged along behind, still doubting but hoping against hope.

The stargazer's wife looked daggers when they approached. "Why'd you bring him back? What do you intend to do?"

"To restore justice. One should not lose faith in it at **such** an early age."

His wife bit her lip, led Anya to the back seat, got in beside her and slammed the door.

"So," her husband said. "Two favoured **males** will sit in front. After you." He held the door for Sashuk, waited until he was seated and then closed it. It was so clean and wonderful inside and there were so many shiny knobs and levers. Anya's mother was so furiously silent in the back seat that Sashuk actually felt her hateful gaze on his back. Not only did he not dare touch anything, he was even afraid to move and breathed in short gasps.

"Like it?" the stargazer asked when he had slipped behind the wheel.

Sashuk was too overcome to utter a word. Instead, he nodded vigorously several times.

"What do we do to start the engine?"

"Blow the horn," Sashuk prompted in a whisper.

"Indeed? Although I believe you're right at that. It's not much of a drive without a bit of honking. Go right ahead."

Sashuk stretched his hand towards the big black button in the middle of the wheel and pressed hard, but there was no sound.

"Nothing doing. It's a magic horn, a real stargazer's horn. I'll have to take the spell off it first. Abra cadabra," he mumbled. "Now press this."

Sashuk touched a small chrome rod under the wheel gingerly and a blast issued over the steppe. It was loud and clear and as unlike the hoarse quacking sound of Uncle Semyon's horn as the battered truck was unlike this orange beauty.

"I want to press it, too, Daddy!" Anya shouted, jumping onto the seat, hanging over her father's shoulder and stretching towards the chrome rod. The Moskvich's clear voice carried over the cliff and down, scaring the gulls into the sea.

"All right, everyone. Enough is enough. Otherwise I'll put a spell on the car again and it won't move."

Sashuk pulled back his hand. Anya's mother dragged her down and back angrily. Her father turned a key, something grumbled and was still underneath them.

"Is it broken?" Sashuk asked anxiously, but then saw that nothing was broken, for they were moving. In fact, they seemed to be floating.

"Shall we step on the gas?" Anya's father asked.

"Sure!"

"Hang on. I'm taking you to the end of the world."

"Sure!" he nodded as excitedly as before. Sashuk would have agreed to anything just then as long as it meant riding in this wondrous car. It swayed gently on the bumps in the road, dragging a long trail of dust behind it and going so fast the wind tore in through the windows.

But happiness never lasts long. The car drove along a back road past four cottages, turned into the street and stopped by the gate of the fifth. The dust that could not catch up with the car before now attacked it, engulfing it in a heavy yellow cloud. The stargazer's wife hurried out of the car, sneezing angrily and dragging Anya off. Sashuk looked at the stargazer questioningly.

"All out. We've arrived. The journey's over."

Sashuk was overcome by a terrible feeling of disappointment. He climbed out and walked off a bit, but the moment the man turned the car into the yard he pressed against the picket fence. Once in the yard Anya's father raised the hood and poked about in the motor for a long time. Then he lowered the hood and closed the doors. Finally, noticing Sashuk gazing through the fence, he said, "Do you intend to spend the night here?"

Sashuk said nothing.

"Hurry up home, or you'll be in for trouble, too."

Sashuk turned away, then spun around and said hopefully, "Can I come over again, huh?"

"By all means," the stargazer replied and now Sashuk could clearly see him wink, despite his dark glasses.

A blissful smile appeared on Sashuk's face. In a moment he was off, racing towards home.

Our Daily Bread

Beam had been very lonely without him and dashed out, but Sashuk was too busy to play with him. He made straight for the dormitory and the men's shaving mirror which was always on the windowsill. He spat on it and wiped it clean with his sleeve, but it still showed a badly peeling nose. The skin over his nostrils was red and as shiny as a boil. All around it were the remains of his old skin. Sashuk tried rubbing off the flakes, but underneath was the same inflamed, shiny red skin.

"Why are you peeling your nose?" Ivan Danilovich asked.

Most of the fishermen were in the dormitory. Some were having a snooze, others were resting before dinner and the evening's fishing. Zhorka was awake, lying on his cot with his arms crossed under his head and his feet resting on the high foot of the cot. He was also watching Sashuk and shouted, "Why, he's found himself a girl friend! I saw them run off towards the car. She's really a dish! I can't imagine where he picked her up! That's why he wants to look pretty."

The men laughed. Sashuk blushed, clenched his fists and turned to face them. To think that he had intended to tell Zhorka about the car and everything. "Shame on you! That's what!" he shouted.

"Don't worry, I won't try to get her away. But don't forget to invite me to the wedding!" Zhorka laughed heartily.

The fishermen, looking at the beet-red, furious Sashuk, joined in.

"You old dogs," Ivan Danilovich scolded. "Who're you laughing at?"

Sashuk hated them all. He ran out of the dormitory and into Beam, who scuttled towards him, but Sashuk pushed him aside. The puppy squealed. Then he felt terribly ashamed of himself and sorry for Beam. He bent down to pat him. "All right, don't be mad at me. I didn't mean it. It was because I was so mad."

Beam could never bear a grudge. He wagged his tail and licked Sashuk's hand. Sashuk scratched his ear, rolled him over and finally calmed down.

His mother had come back from town and was cooking their dinner at the outdoor stove. "Give me another shirt, Ma," he said, running over to her.

"What for?"

"Mine's dirty."

"Don't play in the dirt. You only put it on yesterday. What's made you so clean all of a sudden?"

"Aw, Ma."

"Don't pester me. I feel bad enough as it is."

She really did look bad. She moved with difficulty and seemed bent over. Her face was very pale, with dark rings under her eyes. Drops of perspiration had appeared on her temples. Sashuk went over to the wash basin and took a long time washing his hands. He even rubbed them with sand. True, they became a bit lighter, but not much, while his fingers remained as they were, broken nails and all.

Sashuk never once lifted his face from his bowl nor spoke to anyone all through the meal. It was a matter of principle since that's the way they were.

The fishermen went down to the pier. His mother began washing the dishes, sighing deeply and stopping every now and then. Then she went off into their room and lay down. Sashuk headed for the beach, hoping secretly that the stargazer would bring his family down to swim again. There were no more big jellyfish in the water now, they had all gone out to sea, to the chasm from which they had come to the shore to warm themselves in the sun. Some small jellyfish bobbed near the water's edge but they, too, were gradually floating away. The sun went down behind the top of the cliff. The stargazer did not come and would probably not come now. Sashuk trudged off towards home.

His mother was lying in bed and moaning softly. It made him feel very uncomfortable. He went out into the yard, sat down at the long wooden table and watched the sunset gradually fade and go out. The lavender of twilight became denser and bluer. Then, quite suddenly, everything became pitch-black.

At the far end of the village a dog barked. Others joined in. For a while they kept it up, as if they were calling a roll before going on night duty. Then everything became still. No splashing of a wave came to his ears. The light breeze that had been blowing from the sea all day long had died down, while the off-shore wind had not yet risen. Sashuk was engulfed by the dense silence. It was scary to sit out there in the dark. He looked around. The open door of the house where his mother was lying in bed was only a few steps away, and his bare foot rested on Beam's short, warm hair, for the puppy had curled up under the bench. "There's nothing to be scared of," he said to himself, trying to bolster up his courage. "If you're scared you'll never find it." Although the stargazer had not told him how to look for it, he'd manage to find it somehow. If it was his star it would signal to him somehow. By blinking, maybe. The stars were coming out in the black sky, but they were so faint and feeble that not one of them could possibly be his. Sashuk leaned on the table, his cheek resting on his fist. "This is no place to be sleeping."

Ivan Danilovich's hand, as scratchy as sandpaper, raised his head from the table. There was a light on in the house and he

could hear the men's voices. They had come back. He did not want to reply at first, but recalled that Ivan Danilovich had never laughed at him, that he was the strongest of all the fishermen and that he knew more than anyone else. Maybe he knew about stars, too?

"I'm looking for a star. The man who owns the orange car said that everybody has to have a star."

"Is that so? Come on then, I'll show you." They walked away from the wooden roof that shut out the stars. "Do you know where the Big Dipper is? No? Then follow my finger. There are seven stars strung out like a dipper. Now look up through those two stars and you'll see the Little Dipper with the handle pointing the opposite way. There's a star at the end of the handle. See it? That's the North Star. It's the most important star for us. It always tells us where the north is. If seamen or fishermen ever get lost and have no compass and don't know where land is, they look for the North Star and it shows them the way home."

"No," Sashuk said after some thought. "It belongs to everybody. But he said every person has his own star."

"Then you'll have to look for it yourself. Some other time, though, because it's time for bed now. You should have been asleep long ago."

His mother was not sleeping. Her feverish eyes stared off into the corner of the room. His father stood by helplessly, saying, "What you need is some cool juice. Maybe it'd make you feel better. What about tomorrow?"

"I'll stay in bed. Maybe I'll feel better. Go to bed. I know how tired you are."

Sashuk lay down on his hard bed and thought that some juice would be nice, because there'd be some for him, too. When he had been sick his grandmother had made juice just for him, but he recalled that he had not wanted it then. However, when he had got well there wasn't any more juice. Why was it that only sick people got all the tasty things when they didn't want them, but people who were well and wanted them never got any? Sashuk didn't have a chance to think this important thought through to the end,

for his eyes closed and his thoughts scattered like peas out of a sack.

It was very quiet in the house when Sashuk awoke. That meant the fishermen had gone and he had overslept again. But then he saw that his mother was still in bed and that meant it couldn't be very late. He slipped outside quietly so as not to waken her. The sun had just risen over the sea. If he squinted he could look straight at it. Sashuk squinted out of each eye in turn, staring up at the sun until his eyes hurt and he felt dizzy. Then he remembered the events of the previous day and headed out of the yard, but stopped and ran back to the wash basin. He splashed some water on his face and even wet his sun-bleached forelock. There was no time to go for a towel, so he wiped his face on his sleeve and was off.

The orange Moskvich was still in the yard behind the picket fence. Although the cottage windows were wide open, he could neither hear nor see anyone. They were all asleep. The street on which the single line of cottages stood was deserted. Since these were city people they would probably sleep on and on. Still, Sashuk did not leave. He wandered along the roadside ditch, but there was nothing of interest in it, nothing but hard clay, weeds and real junk. The sun was getting warmer. There was a hungry rumbling in his stomach, but still the people in the cottage went right on sleeping. He cast a parting glance at the Moskvich and walked off. Surprisingly, his mother was still in bed.

"I'm hungry, Ma." She wasn't sleeping. Her feverish eyes still stared at the spot in the corner under the ceiling. The rings under her eyes had got still bigger and her face had a bluish cast. Her parched lips moved, but the words did not come right away.

"Take the key. . . . It's under my pillow. Cut yourself some bread in the storehouse. . . . But don't cut yourself."

"What do you think I am, a baby?"

"But son, there's some bacon there. Don't take any of it. It's for the fishermen. You can take some sauerkraut if you want to. It's in the barrel."

Sashuk stuck his hand under her pillow and found the key. The storehouse was out in the yard, half-sunk into the ground. It was dark and cool inside. Pressing the loaf of black bread to his stomach, he cut off the heel. After a moment's hesitation he cut off another chunk for later and for Beam. The bacon lay on a crate under a linen cloth. There was a lot of it. Three large white sides marked off in quarters and covered with coarse salt. Sashuk liked bacon, but did not have it often. He glanced back at the open door and decided that no one was watching. Then he swallowed hard and put the cloth back on the bacon with a firm hand. The sauerkraut was old and stank of the barrel. The smell made him sick. He sprinkled some salt on his bread, locked the storeroom and ran back to his mother. Beam wriggled underfoot, his ring of a tail wagging madly. Having got a chunk of bread, he sprawled on the ground and began eating it as hungrily as his master. Sashuk's mother looked up at the loudly-ticking wall clock.

"Goodness, it's nearly six," she said and tried to get up, only to lay her head back helplessly on the pillow again. "The fishermen will be back soon, son," she said after a while.

Sashuk stopped swinging his legs but kept on eating.

"And here I am, sick. They'll have nothing to eat." Sashuk stopped chewing. He placed his hands between his knees and waited for her to continue. "Do you think you could try to help?"

"But I don't know how to do anything."

"As best as you can."

"I don't want to, Ma. And I don't have any time. They can cook for themselves."

"Wait. Just think. They left before dawn and they won't be back till eight. They're not out there having a good time, they're working. It's very hard work, Sashuk. Did you ever see their oars?"

Sashuk nodded. The oars were huge. He tried raising one once but couldn't even move it. It was like a log. That's why there were two men to an oar.

"Just think, they've been swinging those oars for five hours."

"I'd stop if I got tired."

"Silly boy. They don't do it for fun. They've got to earn their living. All you do is play, and see how hungry you get. But what about them? I'm sure their arms and legs ache."

Sashuk tried to imagine what it felt like to have your arms and legs ache but couldn't. However, he knew from experience that the fishermen were always starved when they got home. They always ate quickly and in silence. Then they would lie down to rest. That was because they got so tired. But now they'd come home and there wouldn't be anything for them to eat. They'd have to start cooking and stand around waiting. They'd be angry and they'd begin to grumble. Even Ivan Danilovich.

"All right. Only you tell me what to do."

"That's a good boy," his mother said and her lips trembled. "Maybe we can make them some gruel. I'll tell you how to do it step by step. First, clean out the firebox. Use the poker to get it real clean."

A moment later there was a regular volcano erupting at the outdoor stove with ashes rising in a cloud and covering everything around it. Sashuk sneezed and coughed, but kept working the poker inside the firebox until it was thoroughly clean.

"Now what?" he said, running back into the house.

"Goodness! You're full of soot! All right. . . . Now fill the big pot with water till its two hands to the top. And fill the kettle, too. And then start the fire."

Luckily, the iron water tank was close by. Sashuk carried the water in a small pot, placing his palms against the side of the big pot to measure the water level each time. The cracked enamel of the pot was soon covered with black sooty smudges from his hands, but he had measured exactly as much as he had been told to. Starting the fire was no trouble, for he and the boys had often made bonfires in the marshes and in the back gardens. He soon had a roaring fire going in the stove.

Then Sashuk brought two measures of millet up from the cellar and cut off a quarter of a side of bacon. He sliced the bacon into cubes. Beam had caught wind of the delicious smell and tumbled about underfoot whining.

"It won't help, so be quiet. I told you you couldn't have any, didn't I? It's for the fishermen."

However, the temptation was too great. He cut off a small bit of the rind and gave it to Beam. Then he cut off another small piece for himself and stuck it in his mouth. The rind was very tasty and would last a long time if he sucked it, but Beam swallowed his piece whole and scratched at Sashuk's legs with his sharp little nails, gazing into his eyes so devotedly that Sashuk finally took the piece from his mouth and gave it to him.

The gruel came to a boil. Sashuk then discovered that the hardest part was mixing it. The large wooden spoon sank nearly as far as the tip of the handle, while the gruel got thicker and thicker, making it ever harder to mix. He added more water, but it got thick again and bubbled up. Steam came out of the bubbles with a hissing sound and blobs of the boiling gruel spurted up. Quite a few of the blobs fell on the stove top where they burned and smelled terribly.

Then a blob fell on his wrist. He dropped the spoon and ran howling to his mother.

"Burnt yourself? Spit on it and put some salt on it. It won't burn as much that way and it'll go away after a while."

Sashuk salted the sore spot. The salt dried and stuck to it in a crust. After a while it really did begin to feel better.

Meanwhile, the boats were pulling in. Sashuk ran down to the pier, forgetting his burn, shouting proudly, "Daddy! Ivan Danilovich! I cooked you gruel! All by myself!"

"Why didn't your mother?"

"'Cause she's sick!" Sashuk announced happily. "That's why I cooked it."

His father and Ivan Danilovich exchanged glances. Then his father jumped up onto the pier and headed quickly towards the house. Sashuk felt hurt, for no one seemed pleased or surprised that he had cooked the gruel all by himself.

There was not much fish that day and they quickly unloaded it. After the conveyor belt had carried it up to the shed, the fishermen headed home. Sashuk ran after Ivan Danilovich. He was still pout-

ing. Ivan Danilovich went straight to his mother's room. She turned her head towards him with difficulty.

"Don't be angry, Ivan Danilovich. I just didn't have the strength to get up."

"Never you mind. We won't die of hunger. You hurry up and get well," he said and nodded to Sashuk's father. The two of them went out into the yard. "She doesn't look good, Fyodor. You'll have to get Nastya to a doctor."

"Where'll we find one?"

"There's none here, that's for sure. The nearest one is in Tuzli. You'll have to take her there."

"How?"

"Don't be such a dimwit! Who, how, where," he mimicked. "Go down to the village council, or to the collective farm office and get a car. There are people there, they'll help. I can't see them refusing you. And don't take *no* for an answer." His father turned without a word and quickly walked out of the yard.

"Well, Cooky, show me what you've made."

Sashuk pulled the heavy wooden lid from the pot. Ivan Danilovich peered inside.

"You mean to say you made this all by yourself?" Sashuk nodded quickly several times. "It looks like fine gruel! Though it seems a bit burnt on the bottom. Well, no matter. That might even make it taste better. Good for you!"

Sashuk beamed. It was Ivan Danilovich himself praising him.

The men sat down and began to eat. Sashuk waited for them to praise him, too. Instead, Ignat muttered: "What kind of gruel is this? It's so thick you can hack it with an axe."

"You'll make do with it as is," Zhorka said. "It's our daily bread, right, Boatswain?"

"Maybe you don't mind what you eat. I think you'd even eat a chair. But a man needs a good meal after a day's work."

"Don't you like it?" Ivan Danilovich asked Ignat. There was nothing pleasant about his voice this time. "You can thank the boy for cooking what he did. Otherwise you'd have had nothing but bread."

The gruel really was too thick. It was hard to swallow and had a burned and bitter taste, but to Sashuk it seemed the tastiest he had ever had. As for Ivan Danilovich, he certainly knew more than anyone else and he'd never lie.

Getting a Car

Sashuk had had his fill of gruel and suddenly felt very tired. Cooking gruel, he discovered, was a job that could also make you tired. He would go back to the dormitory with the men and would also lie down after working so hard. However, Ivan Danilovich was saying, "You might as well tidy up, Zhorka." At this, Zhorka made a face. "Well, somebody has to and you're the youngest one here."

"All right. If the chef here gives me a hand. What do you say, Boatswain? We'll have the place clean in no time, won't we?"

Sashuk was all for it. He was ready to do anything, even to cook another pot of gruel, just as long as they'd all say what a fine cook he was and what a big help.

"Now then, where do we start?" Zhorka wondered. Then he saw the small tin washtub Sashuk's mother used for washing clothes and dumped all the bowls and spoons into it. "I'll wash. You carry them back to the table and line them up."

"And then wipe them?"

"What for? They'll dry in the sun anyway."

Indeed, the sun made the tin bowls and spoons so hot they burned Sashuk's hands.

"You sure made a mess of this pot! We'll need a road scraper to get it clean. Go get me some sand."

"Where from? There's none here."

"Isn't there enough on the beach? I thought you had brains."

Sashuk headed for the beach on the run, never stopping to think that he had nothing in which to carry the sand back until he got there. He found a way out by filling his shirt with dry sand. Then, supporting his ballooning shirt with both hands, he jogged back.

Trickles of sand tickled him as they ran down his body, but still he managed to bring back half of his load.

Zhorka was scraping the pot that was cemented into the stove. Sashuk leaned against the other side of the stove watching him.

"What's a boatswain?"

"Oh, he's very important. He's the most important man on the ship."

"Like a chief?"

"Not really. He's got quite a few chiefs over him. No, a boatswain's in charge of things, but at the same time he's one of the fellows. He knows his ship inside out. That's what's important. And he knows quite a bit about life, too, and his crew as well. Now, then we've finished the job and we're free to hit the sack. Say, where's your girl friend? Don't tell me you've jilted her."

"Aw, leave me alone," Sashuk said, turning red again.

"All right. I was only teasing."

Zhorka went off to bed, while Sashuk ran back to his mother. Maybe she had changed her mind and would give him a clean shirt after all. She was even paler than before, breathing with difficulty and moaning. He could see this was no time to ask for a shirt. Sashuk turned in the doorway, but his mother had noticed him. "Sit here with me a while, son."

He sat down by her bed. "Ivan Danilovich said I did a good job."

"Yes, you're a fine boy."

"And then me and Zhorka washed the dishes!"

His mother did not reply. He knew she was angry because he was spending so much time with Zhorka. Sashuk crawled under his bed, got out the glass float and gazed at his treasure for a long while. Then he hid it under the bed again. Flies were buzzing on the window panes. He caught one. It tickled his hand when it buzzed inside his fist. He soon tired of catching flies. His mother kept looking at the same corner near the ceiling and moaning softly. It made him feel very uncomfortable.

"I'll go out and play with Beam."

"All right."

However, instead of playing with Beam, he ran straight down the road to the fifth cottage. When he reached the yard he came up short. The car was gone. It had vanished. There was no trace of it in the yard, in the barn with the doors wide-open or even behind the barn. They had gone. There were fresh tire tracks in the thick layer of dust on the road. That meant they had left but a short while before. Maybe just a few minutes ago. The stargazer had fooled him, and this after inviting him over. Not really inviting him, actually, but he had said Sashuk could come over. And then he had driven off. Golly!

Sashuk was ready to cry. However, since he was not a cry-baby, he stuck his fists into his pockets and glared down the road. Maybe they hadn't gone off for good. Maybe they'd just gone to the market or some place else and would be back soon. He would have liked to go into the house and ask where they'd gone, but he was afraid the lady would chase him away. So he decided to wait around for them. It was no fun going back home where his mother was moaning and the fishermen were all fast asleep.

He crossed the ditch, sat back on his haunches near an old poplar and waited. He didn't know how long he had been waiting. The sun had not moved at all. Besides, he did not know how to tell the time by the sun, and he naturally did not have a watch. The street was deserted. A woman had come out of one house, gone into the next and then returned. Once a dog had trotted by.

Time crawled on. His hopes died. Sashuk crossed the ditch and was about to head back home when he spotted his father returning from the village. He was covered with dust. Dirty trickles of sweat were running down his face.

"What are you doing here?" his father demanded. Without waiting for an answer he continued, "How's your ma?"

"She's in bed."

"I don't know what to do! I've combed this village and the next one and couldn't get a car. No one keeps horses any more. All the collective farm trucks are out in the fields. Harvest time's the worst time. At the village council they said they only had a bicycle

left." He wasn't really speaking to Sashuk, he was speaking to himself, because he had no one to talk things over with and did not know what to do.

"That's a joke, offering me a bike. It's twenty-five kilometres to Tuzli. She could bleed to death."

"Why?"

"Because she's very sick. If we don't get her to a hospital she'll die. What'll we do then?"

"No she won't! She's not old."

"Silly. Do you think only old people die? We shouldn't have gone shopping yesterday. But maybe she got all shook up in the truck coming here."

Talking to himself he hurried along past the back gardens, taking the short cut, while Sashuk tried to keep up with him, thinking feverishly. Why did his mother have to die? She'd just be sick for a while and then she'd get well. She was sick once before and went to the hospital for two weeks. In fact, things were really good when she was away. Even though they often didn't have a hot meal, but so what? He was his own boss then and could do whatever he wanted to and come home whenever he wanted to. His father said she might die! He had only seen a dead person once in his life and that had been his grandmother. She had lain quietly, as if she were sleeping, and then they had taken her away.

He was becoming very anxious. By now he was running and noticed that his father was running, too.

When they reached the deserted yard his eyes lighted on the coastguard tower. Why hadn't he thought of it before? They had horses, he had seen one himself! Maybe they even had a jeep or something.

Sashuk set off at a run, past the old trenches and the ruins of the pillbox. There were no horses in sight near the tower, but he was sure they were somewhere nearby, maybe even hidden away on purpose.

He was out of breath when he reached the foot of the tower. He threw back his head and shouted, "Hey, there! Hey!" There was no reply. He pounded on the ladder and shouted again. "Hakim!

Hey!" It was very still on top of the tower, as it was everywhere else. The only sound was that of the wind whistling forlornly among the crossed beams.

Sashuk began the long climb. It was difficult for him to manage the wide spaces between the rungs. The door was bolted on the outside, which meant there was no one inside, but still he opened it. The little room was empty.

For some reason or other climbing down was much worse than climbing up. He went down backwards, feeling for each rung with his right foot, finding it finally, barely touching it, then bringing down his left foot and searching for the next rung with his right foot again.

Crushed by defeat, he trudged home. He was nearly there when he noticed a cloud of dust on the back road. Sashuk gazed at it dully, for dust raised by the wind was not something to attract his attention. Then there was an orange flash as the wind carried off the dust. He could see the car heading towards the slope and the beach. Sashuk dashed towards it, then stopped and ran for the house.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

"Shush!" his father hissed and tried to head him off. "Can't you see?"

His mother was lying in bed with her eyes closed. Now, however, her face was not only pale, it was grey-blue.

"But, Daddy!" Sashuk shouted in a whisper. "The stargazer's back!"

"Stop jabbering!"

"It's the man with the car! Let's go and ask him."

His father jumped up and the two of them ran after the orange automobile. Anya was skipping along towards the beach. Her mother was following with a tightly-packed beach bag, while the stargazer was closing the car doors. He shouldered the tent poles that were wrapped in a white sheet.

"Hello, there!" Sashuk's father called out in a desperate voice. "I'm awfully sorry to bother you, but please, please help us!" He was wringing his hands as he spoke. Sashuk noticed that his face

was haggard and his white lips were trembling, which made his own lips tremble.

"What's up?" the stargazer asked, setting the poles down.

Anya's mother took several steps towards them but stopped a short distance away.

"My wife's sick. I have to get her to the hospital in Tuzli. I've tried everywhere, but there's not a car or a truck to be had, not even a horse! It's only twenty-five kilometres. It's even less than that if you take the beach road."

"Come over here for a moment, Evgeny!" the woman said.

"One sec," he said to Sashuk's father and walked towards her.

They stood about a dozen steps away and spoke in low voices, but Sashuk heard every single word.

"Don't you even think of going!" she hissed.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said! Do you know what she has?"

"I know that she's ill, and that's all that matters."

"But what about us? What about me? Don't we count? Have you given any thought to the consequences?"

"Do you realise what you're saying?" He spoke in a strange, dry and angry tone of voice. "The woman's ill and needs help. I've still got a conscience."

"Well, that's the limit!" His wife was furious. Her nostrils had turned white and were flared as if she were running. "Go on, act like you're an ambulance for everyone and his brother, but I want you to know I won't stay here another day. Not one single day! I've had enough of filth, charity and snotty boys. More than enough! I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm on vacation and want to spend it decently."

"As you wish," the stargazer said drily and went back to the car. "Get in," he said to Sashuk's father, holding the door open for him.

The fisherman got in clumsily, trying not to soil anything, for he was in his working clothes. Sashuk ran around in front of the car to make sure they'd notice him and tell him to get in, too, but they didn't. He ran along behind in the smothering cloud of dust.

When he reached the yard his father and Ivan Danilovich were easing his mother on to the back seat. His father got in beside the stargazer and they were off in a second, turning towards the rarely-used beach road, past the coastguard tower. When the dust finally settled Sashuk saw Anya's mother striding home with Anya trudging along after her.

The Glass Float

Time dragged on and on, but still the stargazer and his father had not returned. Sashuk lolled about the yard. Then he went down to the beach, but it was deserted. It was boring to be all alone. Besides, not wanting to miss them, he headed back home. The fishermen were sitting beneath the open shed, telling jokes and tall tales, and laughing. Sashuk wanted to join them, but they shooed him off, saying, "You're too young to hang around here. Go on and play."

Sashuk felt hurt, although this wasn't the first time this had happened and he might have expected it. Whenever the men started telling funny stories they'd chase him away.

At last a tiny cloud of dust appeared at the foot of the tower. It was spreading and getting closer. Sashuk ran towards it. The car pulled up by the fence. It was no longer orange, it was tan from the layer of dust that covered it. The door opened and his father got out.

"I don't know how to thank you," he was saying to the stargazer. "Here," and he offered the man a crumpled five-ruble bill.

The stargazer looked at the bill, then at Sashuk's father and frowned. "Are you crazy? Put it right back in your pocket!"

"But. . . ."

"You heard me."

"Maybe I can bring over some fresh fish then?"

"I don't expect any payment." He noticed Sashuk standing nearby and was happy to change the subject. "Aha, the indefati-

gable dead crab hunter! How are things? Have you found your star yet?"

"Uh-uh."

"You'll find it yet. You've got piles of time. By the way, have you seen my family around? Are they at the beach?"

"They went home. As soon as you left they up and went home."

"They up and went, you say? That doesn't sound too promising."

Sashuk thought the man would take him for a ride again and would let him blow the magic horn. Then they would zoom off to the end of the world, straight to the fifth cottage up the street. He even took a step towards the open car door, but the stargazer practically closed it in his face. The car ripped off and was gone.

"How's Nastya?" Ivan Danilovich asked his father. "What'd they say?"

"The doctor was hopping mad. He wanted to know why I didn't bring her in sooner. He said she wouldn't have had a chance if I'd waited any longer. But it wasn't my fault. They said she was going to get a transfusion right away. And that she might pull through."

"Sure she will," Zhorka said. "She'll be up in no time. After all, science being what it is. . . ."

"We won't go into that," Ivan Danilovich said. "Now, men, Nastya's in the hospital. What are we going to do? We can buy some salami today, but that's no solution. It's expensive, and we need a hot meal."

"Right."

"Maybe somebody'd like to volunteer?"

The fishermen exchanged glances and snickered, but no one volunteered to be the cook.

"Give Zhorka the job. He can manage if he tries hard."

"I'll try so hard you'll be sorry!"

"What's the matter? Even the kid managed."

"That was the kid, not me."

"Shut up!" Ivan Danilovich said. "Quit haggling. You're not at the market place. Let's hear some suggestions."

"I'd take the job," Ignat said slowly, "but there's no profit in it."

"Meaning what?"

"This way I get a cut of the catch. What'll I get when I'm the cook? Nothing."

"Listen to him!" Zhorka shouted.

Ivan Danilovich shook his head disapprovingly. "This is your first season with us, Ignat. You're not even a fisherman yet, but listen to you talk!"

"I'm not asking for anyone's share. I pull my end, same as everybody else."

"I wouldn't say so. Not yet. All right, you'll get your cut of the catch. It won't be for long, just till Semyon comes back. I'll send word with him to Nekrasovka and they'll send us another cook. Any objections?"

No one spoke. Ivan Danilovich stuck his hand in his pocket, pulled out the key that had always lain under Nastya's pillow, and handed it to Ignat.

"Here. This is the key to the storehouse. You take over as of tomorrow morning. Now let's go get some food before we set out."

They all went over to the little shop and bought salami and soda pop. Zhorka ordered a bottle of red wine, but Ivan Danilovich shouted at him and so he told the clerk to forget it. The men were not allowed to drink before going to sea.

The salami was very salty and dry, but it was delicious. Sashuk didn't leave a bit of his share, not even the casing. This was the first time in his life he had ever had soda pop. It seemed sickly sweet at first and was very bubbly. Even though the bubbles went up his nose he could have had a whole bottle of it, even two. Or even a barrel full. Why had Ivan Danilovich said this was not a way out? He, for one, was all for it. It would be like having a party every day.

Then Sashuk and Beam, who had had all the casings from everyone else's portion, kept running back and forth to the tap to drink.

"What'll we do about him?" Sashuk's father asked Ivan Danilovich. "Maybe we can take him along?"

"Any other bright ideas? What if a storm blows up and we have the boy in the boat?"

Sashuk wanted to say he wasn't afraid of any storms, that he'd be much better off with them at sea, it was something he had always dreamed of; it wasn't that he was really scared to be left all alone here, but. . . .

However, before he had a chance to open his mouth Ivan Danilovich turned to him and said, "This is the situation, Sashuk. I'm giving you a very important assignment. You'll have to stay on here by yourself and keep an eye on things. You're our watchman now. Is that clear?"

Sashuk nodded. This really was an important assignment and it changed everything.

"You won't be scared here all by yourself, will you?"

"'Course not!"

"Fine. We might get back before it's dark. We're not going out very far today. Don't forget, I'm depending on you."

"I think we should lock the house. Just in case," Ignat said.

"And where's he going to be? No. There's no thieves here, and there won't be any 'in cases', either."

After the fishermen left Sashuk went on his round of inspection, just like a regular watchman. He was feeling very important. Actually, however, there wasn't much to inspect. There were flies buzzing around in the house with its rumpled beds. The storehouse was locked.

The yard, as always, was empty, dusty and sun-scorched. He still had time to run down the street and have another look at the car, but he couldn't leave the yard, not after Ivan Danilovich had said he was relying on him.

The sun was halfway behind the hill in back of the coastguard tower. He wanted to go into the house and lock the door, so he'd really feel safe. But it was still worse inside, where darkness now filled every corner. At least there was still a pink glow on everything outside.

The red edge of the sun turned into a strip, then a dot, and was gone, but it was still light enough to see across to the tower. There was a horse tied up there again and it was switching its tail. That meant the coastguards were there again. He felt relieved. Not that

he had been a bit frightened, but still. If Hakim and the other soldier were there he could signal them in case of trouble and they'd take care of things. But how could he signal them? Maybe by starting a bonfire? No, that would take too long. The best thing would be to fire a shot, but he had no gun. He brought out a box of matches and a kerosene lantern and had quite a time trying to open it, but finally managed to pry it open and light the wick. Just in time, too, because everything was now very dark, with only a bit of light sky in the west, which soon went out also. Sashuk closed the door, fumbled with the key that was always stuck in the lock and finally managed to turn it. It made a grating sound. Then he took it out of the lock and put it inside his shirt. Just in case. You never knew.

If you looked at the burning wick and tried not to think about anything it seemed that all around everything was light and not only within the small circle cast by the burning flame. Then you didn't feel at all frightened. And so Sashuk tried not to look around, but only at the flame. Soon all sorts of bugs were flying towards the lantern. There were tiny ones and bigger ones and really big moths with big, fuzzy bellies. They weren't at all like the butterflies in the daytime, but paler and whitish. They circled round the lantern, hit against the glass and fell to the ground, their wings singed. Sashuk tried to shoo them off, but they kept flying towards the flame and getting burned. He leaned his fist on his knee, placed his other fist on top of the first with his chin on top to be more comfortable. The bugs kept on in a steady stream, buzzing round the lantern. . . .

The flame died down, turned into a dot and then grew big again, having become a bright, sunny day.

The fishermen were sitting at the table in the shade, resting. Sashuk was one of them. Suddenly the orange Moskvich drove into the yard. The stargazer got out, said hello to everyone and turned to Sashuk, saying, "How are things?"

"Fine."

"How's your mother?"

"She's in the hospital."

"That means we'll have to visit her. Get in." He opened the right door for Sashuk.

"Let him drive. I'm relying on him," Ivan Danilovich said.

Sashuk climbed proudly into the driver's seat, while the stargazer got in beside him.

"What do we do to start the engine?" Sashuk said.

"Why, blow the horn!" the stargazer said.

Sashuk pressed the black button. The blast that followed was so loud it made the astonished fishermen clap their hands to their ears.

"Let's step on the gas."

"Go ahead!" the stargazer said and winked at Sashuk.

They were off, racing along the deserted beach road. The coast-guards looked out of the cabin windows and waved. Sashuk stuck his left hand out of the car window and waggled his fingers, as Uncle Semyon did.

Soon the tower was far behind them and finally disappeared. A herd of cows was moving across the scorched steppe. Sashuk blew the horn and the cows scattered and were gone, while the shepherd threw up his hands, gaped and froze in his tracks from fright and admiration.

The car raced on along the road through the steppe. Then they were racing along the streets of Tuzli. From time to time Sashuk would blast away on the horn, making everyone scatter. His mother and a doctor were standing outside the hospital. She wasn't pale and unhappy any more, but rosy-cheeked, jolly and all well. The doctor looked like Zhorka, except that he had a beard and wore glasses.

"Are you all well now?" the stargazer asked his mother.

"Certainly," the doctor replied, speaking in Zhorka's voice. "She got well in no time. After all, science being what it is. . . ."

"Get in," the stargazer said, "and I'll take you to the end of the world. Or right into space."

Then everything became dark, the doctor turned into Zhorka, who was standing over him and shouting, "Didn't I tell you he was a regular boatswain? He even locked the house!"

Zhorka and Ivan Danilovich were standing by the table. The lantern cast its light upon them.

"Good boy," Ivan Danilovich said. "I knew I could rely on you. Give us the key."

Sashuk pulled the key from inside his shirt, handed it over and suddenly burst into tears.

"What's the matter? You batty?" Zhorka said.

"It's n-not t-true!" Sashuk wailed.

"What's not true?" Ivan Danilovich demanded.

"Nothing's true!" he shouted and buried his face in his arm.

The two men looked at him in silence. Then his father came over, picked him up and carried him to bed. Sashuk stopped crying, but sobbed convulsively every now and then for a long while after.

His dream did not continue. When he finally fell asleep he was a deep, dreamless slumber. Upon awakening he recalled his dream and wanted to scold Zhorka for having woken him up. However, there was no one to scold, for the dormitory was empty. The only person he saw outside was Ignat, who was lighting the stove.

Sashuk ran to the cottage where Anya and her family were staying. The car was standing by the porch with its trunk wide open. The stargazer was poking about inside it, his back to the street. Maybe . . . maybe he was getting ready to go for a ride and would take Sashuk along? Maybe his dream would really come true? Hadn't his grandmother said that dreams often came true?

Anya's mother appeared on the porch. She set down two bags and went back into the house. Then Anya came out. Sashuk whistled softly. The stargazer either did not hear him or paid no attention, but Anya turned her head. He waved, calling her over. She came out into the street looking very unhappy. Maybe she was still sleepy. Anya was prettier than ever, dressed in a white dress with red piping, red sandals and a new white sun bonnet with red piping, too.

"What're you all dressed up for?"

"We're leaving. For good."

Sashuk said nothing. He looked at her and then at her father, who was packing their bags in the trunk.

Anya snapped the elastic band of her sun bonnet.

"Because of me?"

"Because of everything. It's Mamma's fault. 'I don't wish to. . . I have no intention of. . .'" she mimicked. "But I like it here. And so does Daddy."

"Well?"

"It's no use arguing with her," Anya said and sighed. "She says there aren't any decent people here, and no facilities or anything. . ."

"Sure there are people here. Piles of people!"

Anya shrugged. Neither of them spoke. It was a long silence. They were both so disappointed.

"I thought you'd catch me another crab. Or maybe I'd catch one myself. I'd hide it."

"Wait! I know! I'll be back in a sec!" Sashuk dashed back to the house, dived under his bed and pulled out the glass float. He held it in a tender embrace as he hurried back to the cottage, running ever so carefully.

Anya was standing by the gate, waiting for him.

"Here!"

Her eyes lit up and her nose crinkled as she smiled happily. "Is it for keeps? For good?"

"Sure!"

"Daddy, look! Look what Sashuk gave me! Pack it, too!" She ran back into the yard and bumped into her mother. As her mother glared at the float her nostrils flared and paled again.

"Why do you insist on picking up such filthy junk?" She snatched the float and tossed it aside angrily. It hit against the iron foot-scraper by the porch and shattered with a dull pop. Anya was thunderstruck. She picked up the slack net. The glass splinters clinked.

"Why'd you do it? Shame on you!" she shouted and then burst into tears and ran to her father. "Daddy! Daddy, you tell her!"

Her father pressed her trembling shoulders to him and stared at his wife in silence. She turned, went over to the car and got in the front seat.

Something else was smashed when the glass float shattered, something Sashuk could not put into words but which made him feel broken-hearted. He glanced around frantically, broke off a lump of dry mud from the bottom of the fence, swung and then lowered his hand. He was shaking with rage. He would have loved to throw the lump of mud at the mean and pretty face, but knew he should not. And so he climbed over the ditch and sat back on his haunches by the dusty old poplar.

The stargazer picked up his weeping daughter and put her down on the back seat. Then he said good-bye to their landlady and started the motor. The Moskvich bumped out of the yard and onto the road.

Both the stargazer and his wife stared straight ahead, never speaking a word to each other, as if there were an invisible but solid wall between them. Anya had fallen on one of the bundles on the seat and was sobbing bitterly. No one noticed Sashuk.

The car turned towards town. The deep mud on the road had dried long ago and had been ground by endless tires into a fine tan dust. It rose in a great cloud behind the rear of the car and concealed the retreating orange wonder.

Greed

As always, Beam rushed out to greet Sashuk, spinning round underfoot, as if trying to catch his own tail. Sashuk was too miserable to notice him. Beam didn't mind. He raced around madly. Every time he rounded a curve his big belly would throw him off balance and he would roll over, but would spring back in an instant and rush towards Sashuk again.

After a while Sashuk calmed down. He even felt a pang of guilt for having brought Beam this far from home and then having no time for him. Something always seemed to come up that made him forget the puppy who was left alone most of the day.

"Not any more!" Sashuk said. "You'll always be with me from now on. Are you hungry?"

The two of them ran off to Ignat.

"Please give me the key to the storehouse," Sashuk said. "I'll get us some bread."

"Who said you could go poking around in there?"

"Ma always gave me the key."

Ignat looked at him strangely but said nothing. Then he turned away, muttering, "I'm not your ma. You can wait till I give you some."

After a while Ignat went into the storehouse, closed the door behind him and finally came out with a chunk of bread. It wasn't the crusty heel, but a doughy piece from the middle.

"That's not enough for two of us."

"Enough of that tomfoolery, feeding a mutt bread! He can have the leftovers. A mutt's a mutt. Don't you ever forget that!"

"Stingy!" Sashuk said to himself and walked away. He broke off the narrow crust for himself and gave the rest to Beam.

No question about it, it was more fun playing with Anya than with Beam, because no matter what Sashuk said to him he gazed into his eyes and wagged his tail. But at least he'd never desert him or go away. Besides, Beam was always ready to run and play until he dropped.

And so they raced along the surf where the sand was hard and moist. The gulls were also waiting for the fishermen to return, hoping to get some free fish, slicing the air as they skimmed back and forth, back and forth. They were very saucy, for they seemed to know that Sashuk and Beam were still little, and were not the least bit afraid of them, coming in right over their heads. Every time a winged shadow passed over them Beam would flatten himself into the sand in fright or bound away and then yap in a hurt voice that made Sashuk laugh.

"Scarey-cat," Sashuk said. "Never mind, though. Wait'll you grow up. You won't be scared of anybody. Everybody'll be scared of you."

Sashuk could see that time as clear as day. Beam would be a huge, strong dog. Everyone would try to get out of his way or else to get on the good side of him. But he wouldn't pay attention to

anyone. He'd only obey Sashuk, his master. They'd always go out together. Beam would walk by his side proudly, growling every now and then or even snapping at anyone who pestered them. No one would ever dare to call Sashuk names or hit him then.

The gulls began screaming madly. That meant the boats were nearing the pier. The fishermen had had a good catch. They were pleased and joked.

"Hey, Boatswain!" Zhorka shouted. "Give us a hand here. We can't manage without you."

Ignat came down from the house carrying a basket in which to take back the fish for their dinner.

"Hi, there, cook! Where's your apron? Naw, you'd look better in a skirt."

Ignat was never one to understand a joke. Instead of laughing or joking, he looked mean and sullen and said nothing.

Sashuk crouched beside Zhorka to help him sort the fish. Beam was excited by all the action on the pier. He kept getting underfoot, sticking his nose into everything. The men chased him out of their way, but he thought this was part of the game, too, and raced around furiously, with his tongue hanging out. Finally, he bumped against Ignat's boot. Ignat kicked him away. Beam made a funny, quacking sort of noise as if he had choked on something, sailed through the air and fell into the water.

Sashuk ran to the edge of the pier. But Beam wasn't splashing around. He was spinning slowly and sinking to the bottom.

"What's the matter? Did he get a mouthful of water?"

"No. He couldn't have."

One of the men in the boats scooped Beam up with a long-handled net and deposited him on the pier. Sashuk touched him, but the puppy did not move. Some water trickled out of his parted jaws. The tip of his pink tongue fell out of his mouth. The men stood around looking at the puppy, Sashuk and Ignat, while the gulls kept up their hysterical screaming as they flew back and forth overhead.

"Did he get himself drowned?" one of the men standing behind Sashuk asked.

"He didn't get himself drowned, he was killed. It wouldn't take much."

"You found just the thing to take your temper out on, didn't you?"

Then, and only then, did the meaning of what had happened finally dawn on Sashuk. He snatched up his puppy, pressing him to his chest, trying to shake some life into him. Beam's tail and paws dangled lifelessly, while his drooping muzzle revealed two rows of small white teeth and the tip of his pink tongue clenched between them. Sashuk was blinded by tears of despair and rage.

"You . . . you nazi!" he screamed at Ignat. "You killer!"

Zhorka, who had been sitting on his haunches by a box of fish, straightened up slowly and frighteningly. He stepped over the box, grabbed Ignat by his shirtfront and raised his fist over him.

"Zhorka!" Ivan Danilovich's voice was like the crack of a whip. For several moments after Zhorka stared at Ivan Danilovich unseeingly, while the veins on his neck bulged so it seemed they would burst.

He lowered his fist and pushed Ignat away. Ignat backed into the conveyor belt.

"Get out of here, you rat. And make sure I never see you again!"

Ignat picked up his basket and walked off hurriedly, his eyes on the ground. The fishermen watched him go in silence.

"Hear me, Boatswain?" Zhorka said, still breathing heavily as he put his hand on Sashuk's shoulder. "Lay him out in the sun. Maybe it'll revive him."

"All right, men, back to work," Ivan Danilovich said.

The warm sun did not help. Beam's coat dried out, while he became stiff. His paws did not bend any longer.

Sashuk sat beside him, his face buried in his knees, sobbing bitterly. He didn't even raise his head when Zhorka came to sit beside him.

"He's done for," Zhorka said, touching Beam's body. "Well, tears won't do him any good now."

"B-b-but I'm s-s-sorry for him," Sashuk choked out the words.

"Sure you are. But feeling sorry for him won't help him any."

"We'll have to bury him." Sashuk shook his head frantically. "But we've got to. If we just leave him here the gulls'll get at him. You know that."

Zhorka dug a hole in the sand at the foot of the cliff. He buried Beam, then took Sashuk by the hand and led him home. It was a good thing he did, for Sashuk kept stumbling every few steps. He kept wiping away the tears that blinded him with his fist, smearing them over his face, but they still kept welling up. Zhorka tried to console him, he even shamed him for being such a baby, but to no use. Sashuk was broken-hearted, overcome with a feeling of guilt for not having paid any attention to Beam the last few days and even for having brought him here in the first place. He had not wanted to leave Beam in Nekrasovka, fearing that something might happen to him if he were left all alone. But if Beam had been left back home he might have been alive now.

The bread and the gruel seemed bitter to Sashuk. They stuck in his throat. When he tried to control his sobs it only made things worse. The fishermen ate in glum silence. There was none of the usual banter or teasing. It wasn't because they were all grief-stricken over the puppy's death, for no one was especially attached to him, but everyone was in a bad mood. The only remark during the entire meal was, "Nastya's gruel was tastier."

No one replied. Ignat pretended he had not heard what the man had said.

Then the fishermen went off to rest. Sashuk left the yard in order not to be left alone there with Ignat.

The midday heat shimmered, flowing over the rises and falls of the old trenches and the broken concrete of the demolished pillbox. Sashuk looked at it all dully, for he had no one to play war with now. Not even Beam, who couldn't really play war anyway. Maybe he would have learned to in time.

Sashuk sat down by the edge of the cliff and gazed at the sea. There was not a boat, a sail or a snatch of smoke in sight. Nothing but the endless sparkles, the sun-spots and the throbbing haze that concealed the horizon. Not even a single gull. They all must be hiding somewheres, gone off to rest, too, probably. There was not

a living soul in sight on the earth, either. The yard was deserted, the village was deserted, crushed by the noonday heat, and there was certainly no one out in the steppe. Sashuk felt so small and lost amidst this great void that he began feeling terribly sorry for himself.

His troubles seemed to have been piling up. First, his mother had been taken to the hospital. Then the stargazer left, taking Anya away. And now Beam was dead and Sashuk was all alone.

It was no fun talking to the fishermen. They always made fun of him. And they never played with him. They were all good to him, but what was the use of that if they were all grown-ups and spent all their time working or sleeping, or resting? Not Zhorka, though.

Zhorka was the first one up now. He came out of the house and they went off swimming together. Then they lay on the sand, talking.

"Don't worry," Zhorka said, "as soon as we get back to Nekrasovka I'll find you a puppy that'll make your eyes pop out! A real German shepherd. The kind of dog the coastguards have. You know what I mean?"

"Yes." Sashuk really would have liked to have a German shepherd, but after some thought he said, "but that'll be another puppy. It won't be Beam."

"No, we can't bring Beam back. If not for Ivan Danilovich I would have killed that rat Ignat."

"I wish you'd have socked him just once!"

"It's too bad I couldn't, but I gave Ivan Danilovich my word. When I get really mad there's no telling what I'll do."

There was gruel again for dinner, and once again it seemed tasteless to Sashuk. However, he was not the only one who thought so. The man who had said that Nastya's gruel was tastier that morning stirred his spoon around in his bowl and muttered, "This is no better'n dishwater!"

"Ignat, did you put any bacon in it or not?"

"Sure I did."

"Then where the hell is it? You can't see a trace of it."

"Well, I have to stretch it to make it last. Otherwise it'll be stuff today and starve tomorrow."

"What's the matter? Isn't there any bacon left?" Ivan Danilovich demanded.

"Sure there is. But there's not much of it. No more'n a side and a half."

"Where'd it all go? There was a lot there."

"How do I know? If I was in charge from the beginning I'd know. But the way things were, anybody who wanted to could get into the storehouse. Even him," he said, nodding towards Sashuk. "Maybe he fed it to his dog."

Sashuk gasped. How could Ignat lie like that? And why should he be lying? He was so amazed and indignant he couldn't speak. He sat staring in horror at the shameless liar.

"Is that why you killed the pup?" Zhorka asked.

"Wait! Don't talk nonsense," Ivan Danilovich said, cutting him short and turning to face Ignat. "Don't you dare say a word against Nastya. She's more honest than the whole bunch of us. You don't go saying things like that behind her back."

"Do you think I took it? Do you mean I'm a thief?"

Ivan Danilovich said nothing, but Zhorka could not be silent.

"That's what it looks like!"

"Did you catch me stealing? Did you see me take anything?"

"Wait till we shake out that chest of yours and see what you've got stashed away."

"Nobody gave you any right to search my things!"

"I don't need any right. You can search my things if you want to. I don't have anything to hide. But if you're hiding anything. . . ." Zhorka rose from his seat. Ignat took a step back towards the house and the door leading to the dormitory. His face became ashen.

"Listen, men," he said, his eyes roving over the fishermen's faces, "this is no way to do things. What if I took along some stuff from home? In case I might want something extra. Don't I have a right to?"

Someone whistled softly. "That tears it."

"Well!" Ivan Danilovich drawled.

All eyes turned towards him. Everyone waited for him to go on. Ivan Danilovich was silent. He was staring hard at Ignat. Then his gaze turned slowly and took in each man in turn. He did not say anything or ask any questions. He simply looked at them. And he seemed to see in their faces something that he had expected to see. Then he turned back to Ignat and said in a steely voice:

"Get going!"

"What? Where to?"

"Get out. For good."

"Why, Ivan Danilovich! Just think how this whole mess started. You can't chase a man out on account of a lousy mutt."

"It's not the dog. It's the men. You have to be a man to be with men. You never learned that. We don't want the likes of you around here. Pack your stuff and get out."

"But why? What'd I do?"

"You know that better than anyone else. Or do you really want us to search your things? The sea isn't a back garden, you can't tackle it alone. We're a team, and we don't like sneaks who are out to make a profit. Is that clear? Anyone who thinks differently, speak up. Now's the time."

"Let him get the hell out of here!"

"Have a heart, men. It'll be dark soon."

"Don't worry, you can hitch a ride. And think it all over on the way. Have a good look at yourself."

Ignat lowered his head as he had at the pier that morning and went into the house.

"Ivan Danilovich," Sashuk said, "he's lying. Honest. Ma didn't once let me have any, not even a tiny bit. She said the bacon was for the fishermen."

"I know."

"How'd you guess?"

"I didn't have to guess. I just know it's the truth."

Ignat appeared in the doorway carrying his chest. He set it on the ground, then said, "What about my pay? There's a law says you get compensation if you're fired before the season ends."

"That's right," Zhorka said. "I can give it to you right now. From me to you. My personal gift." He clenched his huge fists and lay them on the table.

"Quit it," Ivan Danilovich said. "I'll tell the chairman about what happened. Don't worry, he won't haggle. You'll get your share."

"I'm going to file a complaint anyway!"

"You do just that!" Zhorka said. "Now get out!"

Ignat raised his chest to his shoulder, crossed the yard and headed down the road to the village.

His figure, bent under the weight of the chest, kept getting smaller and smaller.

Sashuk sat there, his hands pressed between his knees, watching Ignat from the corner of his eye. He even began feeling a bit sorry for him. "Where'll he go now?"

"Back to Nekrasovka," Zhorka replied. "He'll go back to his gardening and make a sack of money selling tomatoes and cucumbers to the city people at the market in Izmail. Don't worry, a sneak like that will always make out."

The men wandered off. Sashuk and Zhorka were the only ones left at the table. Zhorka gathered up the dirty dishes. Sashuk was deep in thought.

"But why?" he said slowly. Zhorka turned to look at him. "Why are people mean and lie to people?"

Zhorka was silent.

"And why are there bad people?"

"For no good reason. There just are. You can't put them all in a sack and drown them, can you?"

Sashuk glanced up at Zhorka. This was not the answer he was searching for. He began thinking again as he sat there bent over, his hands pressed between his knees.

His thoughts were not happy. It was hard being little. Not because anyone who wanted to could boss you around. That went without saying. No, it was because so many things were hard to understand. He thought how nice it would be to grow up quickly.

If he could only find his star, the one the stargazer had told him

about. When he did he would know who the bad people were and who the good ones were, whom he could trust and whom he couldn't, what was true and what was a lie and, also, what he was to do about it.

"We'll be leaving soon," Zhorka said. "You won't be scared here all by yourself, will you?"

Sashuk shook his head. "Uh-uh. But I'll go down to the pier with you. There's gulls there."

The fishermen left for the beach. Sashuk locked the house and ran after them. The few gulls that were still out at twilight were circling over the pier, crying shrilly. Then the boats set out to sea. Sashuk stood at the edge of the pier, watching them.

A hand was raised in one of the boats, and he could hear Zhorka shout, "Keep your chin up, Boatswain!"

He did not move and did not reply. He just stood there, watching the boats getting smaller.

Finally the sun went down. As always, it became dark very quickly after that. A faint star appeared in the east, gradually becoming brighter and brighter. Soon after other stars appeared. Their reflections sparkled and shone in the black waters of the sea.

Sashuk saw none of this. He had curled up beside the empty wooden boxes and was fast asleep.

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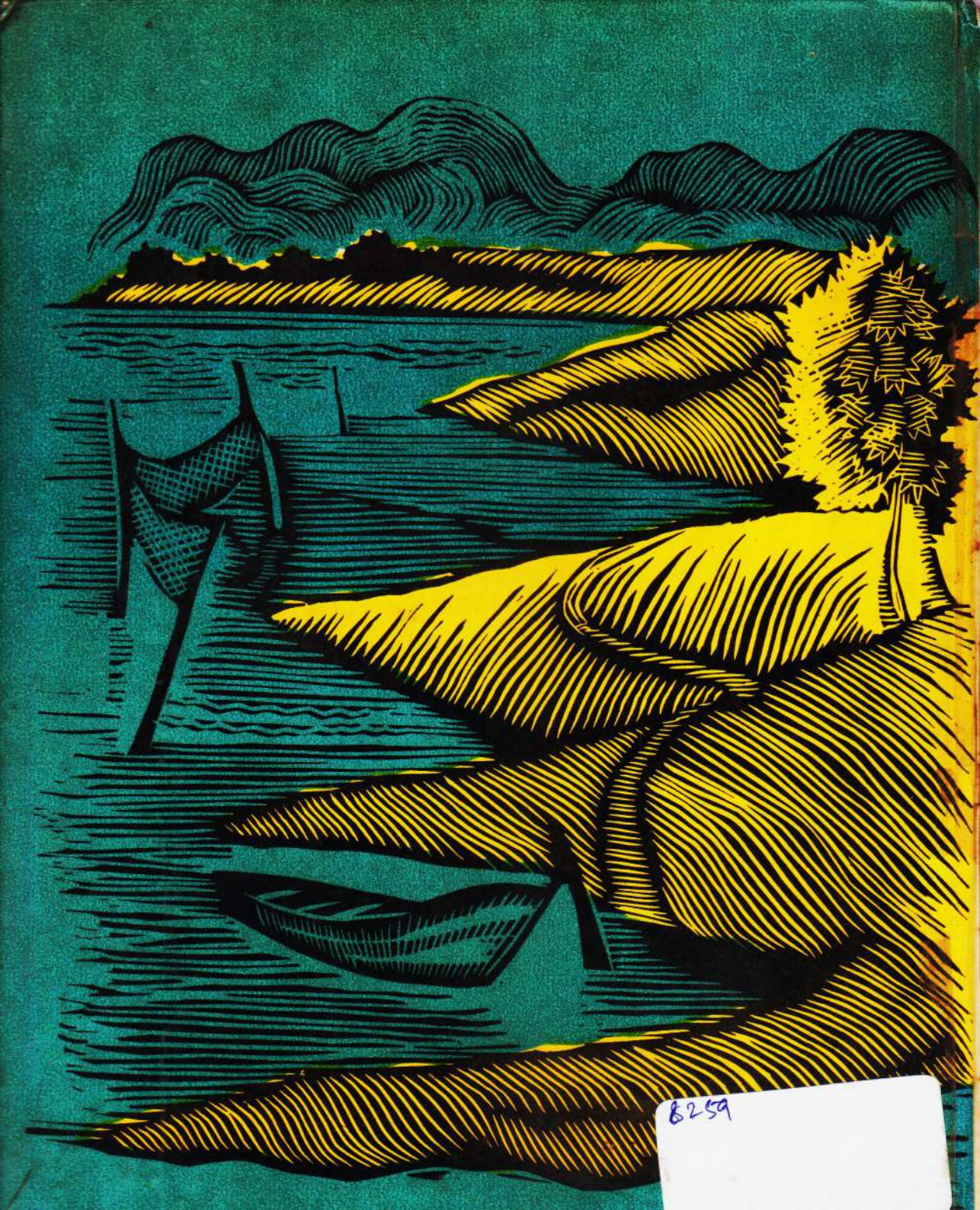
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